Making Space

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Making Space

by Humanities_Handbag, Invader_Sam

Summary

Sonic had been alone for so long, the idea of a bigger family was exciting. A mom, a dad, a slobbery dog, and now two brothers. It was everything he should have wanted.

Unfortunately, there was no manual on learning how to be a brother and the many bumps (and nerf gun shots to the head) that road could hold.

Notes

HumanityinaHandbag AN: To say this chapter was a labor of love would be a lie. This was a SPRINT of love that took place in a single day between myself and my very, very good friend Invader_Sam. The rest will be finished and published as we go. Bookmark to keep updated with our updates :D

The two of us jumped onto a doc this morning and started what will no doubt be a very relatable story about what it means to be a sibling.

I had many a wartime flashback to my own childhood growing up with my sister while I was writing it and don't regret a single one.

We hope you enjoy!

-Humanity and Invader_Sam

What To Expect When You're Expecting - Middle Sibling Edition

Sharing a room was going to be *awesome* .

That's the opinion Sonic came to fairly quickly after it was decided that Tails was going to bunk with him in the attic (Knuckles had been given the newly-finished basement, as his footsteps were too loud for him to be anywhere above anyone). It was mostly Sonic's idea in the first place anyway, even if he refused to admit that he'd been begging Tom and Maddie for bunk beds since he realized they were a thing and this was the perfect excuse.

"You realize this means you might end up with the bottom bunk," Tom told him as they'd pushed the cart through one of the aisles of the Greenhills Discount Warehouse.

"Pshh. As if." Sonic zipped from one side of the aisle to the other, looking at the different sports themed bed frames, stacked on top of one another.

Tom rolled his eyes. "We both know you're going to end up going with the baseball one."

"I'm a hedgehog of *culture*, Dad. I can branch out."

"Uh huh." He began to load the pieces for the baseball themed bunk bed set into the bottom of their cart. "And what's wrong with the sports car bed anyway?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with it. It just doesn't come with the whole superiority complex."

"And these do?"

"Duh. Because I'll be on the top bunk."

"Sure you will. Let's go pick out sheets."

In the aisle adjacent to them, Sonic could hear Tails rambling on to Maddie about the different types of pillow densities and how they'd affect the pre-frontal-something-or-other while Maddie gently chided Knuckles for test punching mattresses.

The two new additions had spent all but one night in the hotel they were using while the builders were finishing cleaning out the wreckage that was their living room. Which had been amazing. So, super amazing. Sonic had friends on his baseball team and the occasional sleepover, but those usually only lasted a day or a night. Having two permanent friends in the house was bound to be great. Sleeping in his room. Sitting at their table for dinner. Watching movies with them and his new, with *his* new…

The little knot he'd been ignoring, deep against the back of his ribs, gave a little twist. He wasn't sure what it was, yet. Not that he much wanted to.

Or… or maybe he did understand it, and thinking about it too much made the knot tighten.

"Hey."

Sonic blinked, suddenly realizing that Tom was kneeling in front of him.

“You good?”

“Yeah,” he said, a little too quickly. “All good.”

Tom reached out to squeeze his shoulder. “This is going to be an adjustment. For sure. It’s just been us Wachowskis for a while, huh?”

Sonic scuffed at the floor with his sneaker. “I guess.”

“And since then we’ve had some pretty neat revelations haven’t we?”

Sonic nodded.

“Mom and I know this is going to be a huge change. We think it’ll be really good, but that doesn’t mean it’ll always be easy. So just… take it one step at a time, bud.” He gave Sonic’s shoulder another firm squeeze.

“Yeah, sure.”

Tom smiled, all too patiently. “All I’m saying is that you’re going to have some big, new responsibilities teaching those two how to be in a family.”

From across the aisle, Sonic and Tom vaguely heard a department store worker weakly say something that sounded a lot like, *ma’am, your red boy is abusing the one free sample policy*.

“Your policy does not sate my hunger!” a voice bellowed from across the store.

Sonic had just grinned and tried his best to push down the little knots. “As long as I get the top bunk, I think I’ll be fine.”

Tom had snorted.

True to his declaration, Sonic did indeed get the top bunk. Mostly because Tails was so excited to have a room that he didn’t care which spot was his, as long as he got to tinker with the string lights.

“I can’t believe this is all yours!”

“Ours,” Sonic had corrected, already imagining all of the amazing times they’d have in their new, shared space.

No doubt, sharing a room was going to be awesome.

Until the first Saturday morning when Maddie made pancakes, and someone decided the best way to announce that was by hovering next to the top bunk and blowing *Reveille* on a kazoo.

Hadn’t the kid ever heard of *sleeping in?*

“Sonic! Sonic! Sonic! *Sonic*!”

Sonic made a *mrph* noise and turned onto his side, burying his face in the pillows.

“ *Sonic!* ”

“Shhhh.” Sonic growled. “Go’way…”

“There are *pancakes* downstairs!”

There were pancakes downstairs every Saturday, like clockwork. Which meant that they’d be there *next* Saturday. And Sonic could happily miss this Saturday in favor of passing out until the sun was up.

What did this kid not get about Saturday’s.

They were about being quiet, playing video games, and pretending like he didn’t have homework for another 24 hours.

“But Sonic-”

“Tails,” he muttered into the pillow, “you can go get pancakes if you want to. I’m not stopping you.”

There was silence from beside him, and he dared to hope that it meant the kid had gotten the message and left.

Which was when the pillow smacked him across the face.

He jolted up, barely ducking away from the second *smack* with the pillow. Beside him, Tails was hovering by the rail of the top bunk, a pillow in his hand. He grinned when Sonic glared at him.

“You’re up!”

“No duh.” He scrubbed his eyes. “You’re not going to let me go to sleep again, are you?”

“Nope!” Tails chirped.

Sonic groaned, but untangled himself from the covers to crawl his way across the mattress and down the ladder. “Fine,” he said, jamming his socked feet into slippers. “But I get to choose the cartoon.”

“Do that again,” Knuckles commanded.

Beside him at the stove, Maddie took the skillet in one hand and flicked her wrist, perfectly flipping the pancake to the uncooked side.

The echidna’s violet eyes widened. “Sorcery,” he declared.

“Practice,” Maddie corrected.

Knuckles considered this, tapping his chin. “So you are saying that… this is a skill I could master as well?”

“Absolutely.”

“Teach me.”

Maddie nodded her head in the direction of the utility closet. “Grab the step stool.”

Ten minutes of gentle, patient instruction and Ozzie wound up with a much bigger breakfast than any of them had intended, happily snatching wayward pancakes from the floor the moment they landed.

Knuckles snorted, releasing the handle of the skillet. “I still say it is human sorcery.”

“We can try again another time,” Maddie said, biting her lip to hide her smile. On instinct, she reached out and scratched the fur on top of his head.

He startled, ducked away from her hand, looking up at her in alarm. “What are you-”

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “It’s something Sonic likes, so I-”

“Do it again,” he demanded, pushing his head back into her hands.

She did, and was rewarded with a deep, rumbling purr from the eldest of her new charges. One big, gloved hand crept its way around her middle. “You okay?”

“Very,” he murmured, voice low against her t-shirt. “The sensation is quite pleasing. You are skilled in many ways, Mrs. Donut.”

She breathed out a laugh, brought one arm around him to squeeze. “It’s Maddie.”

“Of course, Mrs. Madeline Donut.”

“I got Sonic!”

Maddie twisted around from the stove, hand still on Knuckles’ head, to look at her son shuffle into the kitchen behind the youngest of their new clan.

She snorted. “Before 8 on a Saturday? It’s a *miracle*.”

Sonic mumbled something and headed towards the table, only stopping when Maddie reached out her free arm. “Hey. You. Didn’t get my good morning.”

He moved closer instinctively, drawn in by her extended hand, and let her pull him into a side-hug.

A side-hug, not a full-hug.

Not like his *normal*, Maddie-Sonic full hug.

Because the other half of her was occupied.

By an echidna who was now so close to him their noses bumped.

“Your mother is exceptionally skilled, Sonic,” Knuckles told him, too loudly. “She can perform sorcery. Were you aware?”

Sonic craned his neck back to look up at Maddie. “... Sorcery?”

“I flipped a pancake.”

“Oh.” He tried to budge in to her a full hug from her, but Knuckles held firm, blocking his way, his arms still stuck around Maddie.

Sonic glared.

“She’s teaching me,” said Knuckles, completely oblivious to the vengeful eyes on him.

The little knot in Sonic’s throat jumped up, and before he could stop it, he’d already snapped out, “she taught me first.”

“So it *can* be done!” The echidna smiled. “This bodes very well, as I am far superior to you in most feats of physical prowess.”

“Uh-uh, no bragging in this house, mister,” Maddie said, giving his shoulder a little shake.

“I am unfamiliar with the term.”

“It means quit being a jerk,” Sonic snapped without thinking.

“Boys…” Maddie started.

“Do I smell pancakes in here?” Tom entered the room, hair still wet from the shower.

Tails, who had been wringing his hands, standing by the sink, was more than happy to retreat towards Tom. The fox looked a little too relieved. Not that Sonic cared. He was busy dealing with the fact that Knuckles was still wrapped around Maddie.

“You do!” Maddie said, and to Sonic’s horror (and Knuckle’s confusion) she lifted her arms off of the boys, turning her attention to the stove again. “Now I need someone to set the table.”

“I’m on it!” Tail offered too quickly, taking to the air to find the dishes.

Knuckles hopped down from the step-stool, brow furrowed, and crossed the room to Tom. “Mr. Donut,” he said gravely, “Your wife is an enchantress.”

Tom snorted. “What did you do this time?”

“Flipped a pancake.”

“She also has the ability to lower my heart rate with only her hands. Do you also possess this skill?”

“Uh,” Tom looked at Maddie.

“I gave him a hug,” she grinned.

“Oh!” The sheriff chuckled. “That *is* , in fact, a skill I possess. C’mere, big guy.” He dropped to his knees and stretched out both arms.

Before Knuckles could move towards the man, Sonic had already detached himself from Maddie without much thought at all and zipped towards Tom, wrapping his arms around the man.

Tom blinked down at his son. “… morning, bud?”

“Good morning, *Dad*,” Sonic said, turning the word into something much sharper than it was meant to sound, turning around to glare at Knuckles again. He wasn’t even sure why he was doing it. Certainly not to be given the look Maddie gave him that had him very quickly looking away before his heart could drop down to his tail. He squeezed Tom a little harder, hoping the man got the message. Because how was it fair that he’d already only gotten a *half hug* from Maddie, and the first Donut Lord hug of the morning was offered to the Red Jerk who couldn’t even flip a stupid pancake.

Undeterred, Knuckles moved to complete his objective, muscling his way into Tom’s arms, so they were nose-to-nose once again. “The sensation is different,” he said, “but no less pleasing. I see the appeal.” He grinned at Sonic. “You are lucky you have so much of this available to share!”

Sonic did his best to hug Tom even tighter, and was horrified when, like before, Tom merely gave them both a squeeze before standing up, releasing them from their hug.

“I don’t know about you,” said the man, giving Maddie a pointed look. “But I think we shouldn’t let these sorcery pancakes go to waste.”

Sonic absolutely didn’t glare at Knuckles’ back the entire way to the porch, their dining room and living room still covered in wet paint. And he absolutely did *not* try and kick Knuckles when he announced that he would be taking the seat “between Mrs. and Mr. Donut” on the patio couch.

Knuckles grinned at Sonic, said something about *engaging in friendly horseplay* , and then promptly took the seat between Sonic’s parents.

“How did you trap those tiny people in this box?!” Knuckles demanded to know.

“It’s TV, dumbass,” Sonic grumbled into his bowl of popcorn.

“Watch that language,” Maddie chided, setting the tray of chocolate milks on the coffee table. “It’s a recording, sweetie,” she said to Knuckles. “Like the pictures we take on my phone? But moving.”

“So they are not… trapped inside?”

“No.”

Knuckles stared at the television. “ *You are not trapped,*” he declared towards the screen, where an aggressively happy man was showing off a tube of toothpaste. “You can free yourself!”

“They can’t hear you,” Tom said, trying to hide his laugh behind his fist. “They’re somewhere else now.”

Tails, who had been scratching Ozzie behind the ears, flew onto the couch and tucked his legs underneath himself. “It’s so cool how it works, Knuckles. There are different wavelengths of light and sound, and they form together with pixels-”

“The Fox is confusing me again,” said Knuckles. “Speak with *real words*, Fox!”

Tails wavered, disappointed. His ears drooped. “Magic,” he said. “It’s magic.”

“I *knew it*,” said Knuckles.

Maddie sat down besides Tails. “He’ll understand eventually,” she said, rubbing the drooping ears and making them perk up a bit. Then she looked over at Tom and mouthed ‘homeschool?’

Tom nodded ‘maybe’ and took the seat on the other side of the little fox.

Sonic grabbed his own chocolate milk and went to sit besides Maddie-

“Mrs. Madeline Donut! I request head scratches!”

-but before he could, Knuckles was just beside him, jumping up onto the couch.

Sonic blinked, jaw hanging loose. He stared up at Knuckles, and then at Tails who had taken *his spot* between Tom and Maddie. Maddie’s hand was already on Knuckles’ ears, Sonic’s scratches being handed off to the Big Red Jerk.

Whatever, Sonic thought, twisting towards Tom. Sure, Donut Lord wasn’t *as good* at head scratches, but he could still-

“Ozzie!” Tails chirped as the dog decided that right then was the perfect time to jump up onto the couch besides Tom, effectively taking the final spot.

Tom laughed, ruffling the golden retriever’s fur, then his eyes drifted to his son and something flickered across his face. “Alright, dog-breath, down ya go, down ya go. C’mon.

Off.” He nudged the dog back to the floor and patted the spot beside him. “So what are we watching tonight?”

“Speed?”

Maddie piped up, “Don’t think that’s Tails-appropriate.”

Sonic climbed up onto the couch, frowning. “M’not watchin’ any baby movies.”

Tail’s ears went flat again. “I’m not a-”

“Star Wars it is!” Tom announced loudly, grabbing up the remote. As he scrolled through menus, he laid his other hand on Sonic’s shoulder, leaning in to whisper, “Ease up, will ya, bud?”

Sonic deflated just enough to press his forehead against Tom’s side. “I am.”

“Uh huh.” The music started up, fixing the attention of the other three on the couch. “Hey,” Tom said again, pinching Sonic’s ear.

Sonic looked up, mouth still turned down, arms crossed.

“Tails doesn’t know who Darth Vader is yet,” he whispered. “Bet he won’t get a lot of the references, either.”

The frown began to soften into a flicker of a smile, especially when Tails gestured wildly at the screen to exclaim, “who’s that!”

“That’s Luke,” Sonic said, before Tom could. And then, before Maddie could say anything either, he added, “wait until you see their lightsabers. But you’re not gonna be allowed to build one unless you promise to let me try it.”

“No lightsabers,” Maddie laughed.

“Unless we can try them,” said Tom, narrowly avoiding Maddie tossing popcorn at his head.

Tails had wanted to watch the second movie almost as much as Knuckles, who had gravitated off the couch at some point and was now sitting with his nose pressed to the screen. “How will we know what happens! Where do the characters travel to once the screen turns dark! We must know their fates!”

“Next week, bud,” Tom yawned, stretching, ignoring Sonic’s look of betrayal at the nickname so casually gifted away to someone else. “We’ve got a big day of doing nothing tomorrow that I’d very much like to get to.”

“I think bedtime is a great idea.” Maddie stretched. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Tails yawned bigger than anyone would've imagined him able. He slumped against Maddie's side. Sonic began to slide off the couch, moving towards Maddie, who still had her feet up on the table.

Pay the toll, either she or Tom usually said, reaching for their Movie Night Hug.

Except tonight, before Sonic could bump up against her legs, the fox looked up at Maddie and said, "Carry me?"

"Master manipulator over here," Maddie laughed.

"Izzit working?"

"Yup." She stood and then hooked her hands under his armpits and hoisted him up.

From his spot in front of the television, Knuckles turned and looked at Tom.

"Not a chance. You weigh more than I do."

"Alas, you make a valid point, Mr. Donut," the echidna conceded. He stood, cracked his back, and made a move towards the doorway. Then he paused, turned back. "Perhaps, though, I might have another of these, er, hugs?"

"You may indeed." Tom held out both arms and the mighty warrior melted into them.

"Very satisfying, these hugs."

"Yeah, I like 'em." Tom patted the teen on the back. "We'll see you in the morning."

"So you shall." Knuckles began shuffling off towards the basement door. "I have never endeavored to do nothing. It will be quite the challenge. But I am up for it.

"Usually starts off bunking in bed," Tom said.

"*If you're invited*," Sonic muttered.

Tom pinched his ear.

"Goodnight, Knuckles," said Maddie from the stairs, where Tails was already halfway asleep on her shoulder.

"Restful slumber, Mrs. Donut."

"Sonic, you coming?"

The hedgehog looked at the stairs, frowning, shuffling forward, until he was caught up from behind by Tom's strong arms. "Hold on, you. Think somebody forgot to pay the toll."

The knot that had been twisting up tight in Sonic's chest loosened. "Daaaa-*aaaad*," he whined, fighting the smile that was spreading across his cheeks.

In answer, Tom pulled him in tighter, blew a raspberry on the side of his head, squeezing when Sonic laughed. “Night, kiddo,” he whispered. “Tomorrow’s gonna be good. I promise.”

Sonic turned around so he could squish his face first into Tom’s chest, glad to have the arms all the way around him. “Yeah…” he said, quietly.

“And you’ll try to have a good time?”

“… I guess.”

Tom drew his attention with a fist. “Power bump it?”

He softly connected their fists. “Power bump.”

“*There’s* my go-getter.” He squeezed Sonic’s shoulder again before standing. “Go. Before Maddie decides you’re too slow and gives Tails the top bunk.”

“She wouldn’t!”

“I don’t know. Tails is a master manipulator, so-”

The blue streak was already up the stairs before he could finish.

Sonic wanted to believe him. It was a little easier from his current position, but as he climbed up to the top bunk (still his) as Maddie tip-toed away, blowing kisses, he wasn’t so sure.

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He hated that he was right.

Not So Easy Like Sunday Morning

Chapter Summary

In which more routines are upended, new friends are introduced, and Tom and Maddie get some much-needed parenting advice.

Chapter Notes

Invader-Sam AN: Firstly, thank you to everyone who left kudos and all the wonderful comments on the first chapter! You've been brightening our days all week! Secondly, as is our custom, a story that was supposed to be three chapters has BALLOONED into at least six! We'll see where we end up, but it's all stuff we're LOVING, so we hope you all will too!

Tom and Maddie had already set the betrayal ball rolling by hinting towards their Sunday morning routine.

Which, by the way, *Sonic* had started.

It was after he'd been brave enough to finally sneak into their room, finally brave enough to climb up onto their bed, finally brave enough to wriggle between them.

And his bravery had paid off with Sunday mornings, snuggled tight between Maddie and Tom, sleeping in an extra hour until they all finally trudged their way downstairs for cereal and cartoons.

It was as close to perfect as anything could be.

And so when Sunday morning finally rolled around, Sonic was *determined* to make sure that his tradition, his Sunday, his snuggles with his parents (*his* parents) were all *his* . As they should have been.

He didn't expect to sneak out of the top bunk to find the bottom one already empty.

"*No, no, no, no*," he hissed, zipping down the ladder to Tom and Maddie's open door-

"Hi, Sonic!"

-to find Tails already there.

In *his* spot.

Between *his* parents.

Tails was grinning at him, his head popping up from under the covers. Maddie had a book open in front of her, and Tom was scrolling through his phone.

Maddie turned the page she was on and looked up. “There you are, sweetheart. We were wondering when you were going to show up!”

Sonic only glared. “That’s my spot,” he said, from the doorway.

Tails’ ears flattened. “Oh…”

Tom’s eyes flickered up from his phone. “It’s our bed, Sonic. There are no saved spots.”

“But-”

Before Sonic could refute that by telling him that actually there *were* spots, he was pushed aside by a large white glove and a large, clumsy body.

“A pleasant morning to you, Sonic!” Knuckles punched his shoulder in greeting a little too hard. Apparently, Sonic’s annoyed kicks had only been seen as a friendly challenge. “I was told there was to be a meeting this morning!”

Tails’ ears popped back up, glad to see a friendly face, and pat the bed. “Yeah! Their bed is *really big* ! And Maddie’s good at snuggles!”

“It’s my true passion,” said Maddie, attention already back on her book.

“I would like to partake in these… Snuggles.”

“Hold on,” said Sonic, but Knuckles was already clamoring up.

No hesitation. No nerves.

It had taken Sonic weeks to get up the nerve to even give Tom and Maddie a hug. Weeks of bravery and swallowed nerves. He’d earned the spot between them, snuggled tight and safe and warm.

And Knuckles, without a second thought, was shoving himself under Maddie’s arm and into her pillow.

Similarly, Tails did the same, shifting back down under the covers and pressing his face against Tom’s side.

It had taken Sonic weeks to do that.

Tom looked up from his phone, turned his attention to his son. “Bed’s plenty big. C’mon up. I’m scrolling through Abrupt Chaos on Reddit.”

The siren song of Abrupt Chaos was too strong to resist. Especially when Tom was reacting exaggeratedly to each new video. Begrudgingly, he climbed up next to him on the bed, was surprised at the amount of relief he felt when Tom swung an arm over his shoulders.

“He *did* take my spot though,” Sonic grumbled into Tom’s side, breathing in the smell of his body wash and Maddie’s lotion.

“I remember you saying the same thing about Ozzie,” Tom whispered, lowering his phone so Sonic could take a turn scrolling. Tails was already drifting off and Knuckles was busy asking why Madeline’s book was about romance when she had a perfectly capable partner in her life, and was she not content, because he would be happy to escort Mr. Donut out.

Sonic wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, but you can train Ozzie.”

“That’s true.”

“Unless-”

“We’re not training Tails, Sonic.”

“Huh…?” mumbled Tails.

“Nothing, Bud.”

Sonic’s frown deepened. “They’re hogging Mom.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?”

“You’re… fine.”

Tom laughed, and pulled Sonic closer. “Good day, remember?”

“Yeah yeah.”

Tom scratched his ears, and then twisted around to look at the other side of the bed. “Hey, Knuckles. You ever seen reddit?”

Knuckles looked over Maddie. “I am red. I do not need to see more.”

“No it’s-” Tom laughed. “Nevermind. I think you’ll like it. Here, why don’t we-” He winked at Sonic. “Why don’t you and Sonic switch so I can show you.”

He must have given Maddie a look, because she put down her book and reached out. “Thank goodness. Here I was thinking I wouldn’t get my Sonic Snuggles.”

“Never!” Sonic grinned, climbing over Tom’s legs, sticking out his tongue at Knuckles as he settled down next to Maddie who wrapped both her arms around him, tugging him close.

Knuckles was already invested in whatever Tom was showing him, barely giving Sonic a second thought.

“You okay, blueberry?”

“Just a little crowded in here,” he mumbled.

“I suppose so,” she nodded, bringing a hand up to his ears, massaging in exactly the way he liked. “We’ve got a full house now. All we need is an Uncle Joey and we’d be all set.”

He snickered. “I think Wade counts.”

“Glad he’s not the one living in the basement, though,” she said. “Knuckles is much neater.”

“More annoying, though.”

“I can think of one or two annoying things you’ve done,” she said back.

“Or three,” said Tom, eyes on his phone, showing Knuckles how to hold it without shattering the screen *(Earth things are so delicate)*.

“Annoying? Who, me?” He blinked extra-wide up at her.

She laughed before planting a kiss between his ears and he happily burrowed against her. “Hey. Mrs. Patinkins texted me last night. Jeremy was asking if you wanted to play.”

“Playing's for babies.”

“Right. Sorry - I mean, hang out. You guys haven’t gotten to catch up since all the excitement.”

“Oh yeah?” His expression brightened.

“Mhm.” She busied herself smoothing down his quills. “Might be nice to get out of the house for a little while, too.”

He hummed against her side. Having her full attention again felt like a relief. No half hugs, half snuggles, or shared hugs. Just the two of them. Like it was supposed to be.

It lasted about two minutes, just as he was drifting off again, when Tails thought it was the best time to pop out of his little blanket cave and ask if they could watch cartoons, and Sonic found the warm huddle of arms lifting away.

“I think breakfast and cartoons sounds like a great idea,” she said.

Sonic was ready to sink down into his disappointment until Maddie grabbed his hand. “Come on, mister. You can help me make eggs.”

“M’kay.”

“I can be of service, Mrs. Donut!”

“I need help picking a cartoon, bud,” Tom said, before Sonic could snap at the older boy. “Wait until you learn what Pokemon are. You’re going to lose your mind.”

Knuckles did indeed lose his mind after downing two bowls of cereal, ignoring Tails' exasperated remarks of *Their technology makes no sense! And isn't this just animal abuse!?*

Which Sonic would never admit to having laughed at, even if it was funny.

For the most part though, Sonic was in high spirits. Especially when Maddie announced that Jeremy's mom was ready if they were, and he barely had his shoes on before he was out the door, preparing to sprint his way down the road towards Jeremy's house, backpack already slung on his shoulder full of Pokemon cards and a brand new baseball.

"Hold up, buddy!" Tom called after him, jogging down the porch steps, beeping his car fob.

Sonic turned, ears drooping as Knuckles and Tails both trotted down the stairs after his father. "...what's happening?"

Maddie appeared, purse over her shoulder, locking the front door. "Mrs. Patinkins wanted to catch up, so we thought we'd all drive over. You can introduce Jeremy to your- to the boys!"

"I've never met any human kids before!" Tails bubbled, hovering over to the car.

"I, too, am curious as to the stock of human children," Knuckles said "If this Jeremy is anything like the men on Mrs. Madeline Donut's book then I am sure to have a worthy sparring partner."

" *No one* is like the men on Mom's book cover," Tom said. "S'all photoshopped."

"Keep telling yourself that, honey," she said, moving around to the passengers side.

"I'll have you know that all my other girlfriends think I'm *very well toned*."

"Uh huh."

"I can still escort him out," said Knuckles, who was busy trying to figure out how Tom had opened the door with his key, muttering something about sorcery.

"No need," Maddie said, as she buckled Tails into his five-point-harness seat. "We're just teasing."

"Teasing?" Knuckles repeated, eyebrow quirked as he climbed up and into the third row of minivan seats.

"Like, poking fun, but in a way that we both know isn't mean," she explained. "Guess it's an Earth thing."

Tails nodded solemnly. "Teasing wasn't fun back home."

She ran a hand through the fur on his cheek, kissed his temple. "It *can* be not-fun here too. But not in our house. It's one of our rules. Teasing has to be fun, or it has to stop."

He brightened at that. “I like that rule.”

“Me too.” She tapped a finger on his nose, checked that the straps were tight, then closed the van door.

On the other side of the van, Tom stood by the open driver’s side door. “You comin’, Sonic?”

Sneakers rooted in the gravel driveway, Sonic opened his mouth, looking into the van before closing it again. “Knuckles isn’t in a booster seat,” he said. It came out as more of a growl than he meant it to.

Tom didn’t miss a beat. “He also weighs more than the van, bud. I don’t think anything’s gonna knock him out.”

“This is true, Blue One,” said Knuckles from the back of the car where he was rooting through the cracks in the seat, pulling out potato chips. “I am one million percent muscle.”

“That’s not scientifically possible,” exclaimed Tails.

Knuckles chomped down on his Seat Potatoes before a very disgusted Maddie could stop him.

“*I’m* super strong,” Sonic said, gesturing towards his own vacant seat. “Nothing would happen to *me*!”

“Right. Because you’d be in the seat,” said Tom. “Come on. You want to go to Jeremy’s or not.”

“Yeah!” Tails pointed to the seat next to him. “Mr. Wachowski said you have Pokemon cards! Could I see’em?”

Sonic’s brows pinched. “I’ll run there,” he snapped.

Tom looked like he wanted to say something, but Maddie quickly shook her head. “We’ll see you there, honey,” she said, as kindly as she could.

Tails’ ears drooped.

“Thomas!” Knuckles called from the back row. “We shall race the Blue One, yes?”

“No, Knuckles.”

“Then what is the point of these metal machines if we cannot *race them!* Mrs. Donut, I have yet to see the appeal of your chosen mate.”

Maddie snorted in laughter. “Oh, I dunno. He gives pretty good hugs, doesn’t he?”

“Ah, that is true.”

“And you haven’t heard him *sing* yet.”

Tom turned the key in the ignition, grinning. “You ever heard of Jim Croce, Knuckles?”

“Who?”

In answer, Tom merely switched on the car stereo and pulled out of the driveway to the thumping baseline of ‘Bad, Bad Leroy Brown’.

“We’ll see you there, Sonic!” Maddie called out of the window.

Sonic didn’t reply. He stared at the ground until they were gone and out of sight down the road before he took the long way to Jeremy’s. Not that it mattered. He’d get there before them anyway.

But still.

He needed time to clear his head.

Just like he predicted, he did get there before them, which gave him plenty of time to at least start briefing Jeremy, *his* best friend, on what was about to happen.

“It’s not like I asked for this,” he told the other boy, throwing the baseball back and forth across the yard. “Well. Actually. I did. But not *this way*. I just thought I’d, you know… get some other cool friends to hang with who were more like *me*.”

“Super big headed?”

“I think you mean effortlessly handsome,” said Sonic, catching the ball when Jeremy threw it back, giving it a few tosses in his own mit. “But now they’re just… everywhere. And you know what’s even worse?” He threw the ball back. “They’re taking *my stuff!”*

“Ah,” said Jeremy. “Yeah. That happens.”

“I mean, who do they think they are!” He caught the ball. “They took my spot at movie night, and then Mom only gave me a half hug - a *half hug, Jeremy* - and this morning they all just got into mom and dad’s bed like it was nothing!”

“I mean… isn’t it nothing? They’re their kids too now, right?”

When Sonic threw the ball again, it flew over Jeremy’s head.

“They *just* got here. They should be barely anything,” he said, zipping past to retrieve it, tossing it to his friend again, a little too hard. Jeremy winced when it smacked the skin of his palm, resting it in his mit to shake out his fingers. “And it took me *months* to even get there with them! I was… was stressing about even calling them something other than their names, and those two just come in and think they can do it right away?”

“To be fair, they probably saw *you* doing it…”

“That doesn’t mean *they* can! Tom and Maddie were my mom and dad, first!” He groaned, sitting on the grass. Jeremy trotted over to sit next to him.

“You know,” he said after a minute, “I totally get what you mean.”

Sonic raised a brow. “You have two, brand new kids living in your house taking over everything?”

“No. But-”

Before he could tell Sonic whatever it was he wanted to say, there was a horn honking from down the driveway. Cheryll appeared on the front steps, waving her hands above her head.

“Ahoy, Wachowski’s!”

Sonic let out a long groan and tipped backwards into the grass as Knuckles and Tails unloaded themselves from the car, Maddie and Tom just behind them.

“Get ready for the invasion,” he grumbled, just as Knuckles spotted them and lumbered over.

“Human Child! Prepare to be pummeled!”

“Knuckles-”

“I am doing *The Teasing*, Mrs. Donut! I shall only maim the small one to initiate our Earthly Friendship!”

“*No, Knuckles.*”

So it turns out, the worst part of the day wasn’t that Knuckles and Tails had taken over Maddie and Tom’s bed, or that they’d intruded on his time with Jeremy.

No.

The worst part so far was that Jeremy *liked them*.

“I can’t believe your mom lets you have *weapons*.” Tails was already enamored.

Jeremy snorted from his place at the hose, feeding the end into the top of the plastic while Sonic screwed the top onto the already full one (he’d called dibs on the blue one already, not wanting Tails or Knuckles to take *another thing* from him). “It’s not a weapon. It’s a super soaker.”

“Are you filling it with some sort of acid?” Tails hovered just over Jeremy’s shoulder, wide eyed.

“It’s just water,” said Sonic. To demonstrate, he squirted his at Knuckles, who flinched back, looking affronted. “See? No harm done.”

“Harm has been done!” Knuckles declared. “And I shall defeat you at this game!” He lowered his voice. “Was that a good Tease?”

“Great tease,” said Jeremy, grinning, passing the other spray guns to Knuckles and Tails, turning off the hose. “I figure we’ll get onto teams.”

“Are there… rules?” Tails twisted the super soaker in his hands, probably already thinking of a dozen ways to give it upgrades.

“Sonic and I usually follow No Mans Land rules.” At Tails and Knuckles’ blank expressions, he pointed towards the flags set up on the lawn. “If you get sprayed, you’re back to base. The goal is to grab the other teams flag without getting sprayed.”

“Huh…” Tails slowly landed, still processing.

Before Sonic could tell them both *too bad, I guess you can’t play*, Jeremy grinned and said, “I’ve got an idea! How about I team up with Tails so he can see how it works, and Sonic can teach Knuckles.”

“Brilliant!” said Knuckles at the same time as Sonic threw up his hands and groaned, “*what* ?”

Tails bounced on his toes. “That could be fun.”

“You kidding?” Jeremy slung his arm over Tails’ shoulder. “It’ll be the most fun. Especially when we beat them.”

“You’ll never defeat us!” Knuckles punched Sonic’s shoulder a little too hard. “We will defeat you. Isn’t that right, Blue One.”

Sonic shouldered past him. “Whatever,” he said. “Just try not to get hit.”

“I can’t even believe that’s your house…”

Cheryll poured Tom another glass of wine while he scrolled through the pictures on his phone, showing her the giant hole all the way through to the back of the house and what the contractors had done to repair it while they’d bunked in the hotel.

“Crazy, right?” He scrolled through a few more before clicking his phone off, gratefully sliding his newly filled glass towards himself.

“And to think *Sonic* did that.”

Maddie snorted. “He had help.”

Out the backdoor, they could hear Knuckles shouting something about *I will conquer your planet, Earthlings*, cackling from the roof of the shed.

“They don’t really seem like the type of kids to… destroy a house.”

“He’s mellowed out a lot.”

Tom took a long sip of wine. “I honestly think they just needed a place to crash.”

Maddie reached over and grabbed his elbow. “And a family.”

He nudged her with his shoulder. “And a family.”

“Well,” Cheryll looked back outside where Sonic was zipping from tree to tree, her son trying his best to keep up and failing spectacularly. “Good news for them that they found you. I don’t think anyone else has as much experience with…”

“Intergalactic aliens?” Tom offered.

“I was going to say hyperactive kids, but sure. Go with that.”

They watched the kids bolt around, spraying water at one another. Tails flew above their heads, having finally remembered that he could. Knuckles was in the process of digging himself a trench for safety in what Cheryll commented would be a great place for a garden anyway. Jeremy and Sonic had entered some sort of faceoff and were running through a dramatic speech from on top of the swing set.

“It’s nice,” Cheryll said quietly, pouring herself another glass.

Maddie hummed a question.

“Sonic having siblings,” she explained. “It’s nice. It’s why me and Mat decided to have another kid after Jeremy. We wanted him to have a friend around.” She laughed. “Not that he always appreciates it. But he’s a good big brother, most of the time. And Olivia - she would follow him into hell and back.”

“I get that.” Maddie had been the same with her big sister. Rachel nearly knocked her head off most of the time. Despite the bumps in the road (Rachel always claimed that Tom was one of those more *noticeable* bumps), she wouldn’t have given that up for anything. Tom had been a single child, and he’d told Maddie more than once how much he’d wished his parents had had another.

It was what made him wish the same for Sonic. A far leap from how they’d been years ago, dabbling over the idea of kids in general. Their lives had been chaotic enough as it was, and having a child in their lives…

And then Sonic had arrived.

It had taken months of agonizing, slow assurances to prove to the child that he was *theirs* . It had taken even longer for him to realize it.

And even longer to figure out how lonely the kid was. That he could use friends. *A squad*, her husband had said.

And now he had that.

“Cheryll…?”

Cheryll poured Maddie more wine.

“Did… did Jeremy have any sort of *growing pains* .”

“Like puberty? I’m not sure if I know how that works with aliens-”

“No. Like…” she thought a moment, choosing her words carefully. “Like… with having a sibling. Did he ever, I don’t know, act… angry about it?”

Maddie expected Cheryll to look confused, maybe even ask for more clarification.

She didn’t expect Cheryll to *laugh*.

“Oh man,” she said. “You’re going through that already? A little earlier than I expected, but I guess it had to happen at some point.”

Tom blinked. “Earlier than you *expected* .”

“What. You didn’t?”

“I mean,” Maddie started, “I know siblings don’t always get along, but-”

“Lemme tell you something.” Cheryll set her glass down. “When Olivia was less than a year old, I caught Jeremy trying to pack her up to *mail her away*.”

“You’re kidding.” Tom balked.

“In a shoe box, because that’s all he could find,” Cheryll said, snickering at the memory. “He gave himself up by asking me for stamps. When I asked him why, he told me it was because ‘Livy needs you too much’. And he wasn’t wrong. But it made Mat and I stop and think more carefully about making sure he wasn’t feeling forgotten. He got one night a week that was just time with me, and one just with Mat. No baby interruptions. It helped a *ton*. So no. I’m not surprised at all that Sonic’s got Sudden Onset Middle Child Syndrome.”

“Geez…” Tom sighed. “He really *did* just go from only child to middle child, didn’t he?”

“One big brother, one little brother,” Maddie nodded, “In the span of a few weeks. But things were so good when we were all bunking in the hotel…”

“That wasn’t ‘home’, where he’s used to having you all to himself,” Cheryll pointed out. “It’s probably all just hitting him right now. He has to share his stuff, he has to share *you* . That’s a big change for a kid.”

Tom and Maddie exchanged a look, nodded to each other.

“So… what do we do?”

“For now?” Cheryll shrugged. “Just make sure he knows how much you love him. That he’s not becoming a secondary kid. Jeremy’s antics were funny, but he was *terrified* that it meant he wasn’t going to be getting as much love as he used to.”

“We would never do that to Sonic,” Maddie said quickly.

Cheryll grabbed her friend's hand. “I know that, Mads. I do. But remember. You’ve got two kids who’ve never been on Earth. They have to learn *everything* quicker than he did. They’re going to need the extra attention to settle. And that means Sonic won’t be the center of your family anymore.” She squeezed Maddie’s fingers, giving both her and Tom a serious look. “And as much as Sonic can be an asset to you there, and he *will* be, he should be, don’t forget that he’s not an *employee*. It can’t be his *job* to help them get used to the world. He’s your kid first. Earth guide is just a perk.”

“I feel like we should be paying you a consulting fee,” Tom said with a laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Or at least be the ones providing the wine,” Maddie said.

“I’ll put it on your tab,” Cheryll said with a grin.

All's Fair in Super Soakers and Mario Kart

Chapter Summary

In which games are played, new names are tried on for size, and plans are made.

Knuckles, as it turns out, was a little *too* good at Super Soakers.

“I cannot believe Earthling children also take part in war.” He looked over the barricade that he’d constructed out of dirt. Which Mrs. Patinkins was no doubt going to have a field day over.

Sonic looked away from the hole that was now in the middle of Mrs. Patinkin's back yard. “We don’t *partake in war*.”

“Yes we do!” Jeremy yelled from where he and Tails were hiding from behind the shed.

“Not very well,” said Knuckles. He turned towards Sonic again, grinning. “We shall end this then, Blue One?”

Sonic peeked over the dirt mound towards a well soaked Jeremy and Tails. Despite his attempts to be as stoic and uncaring as possible, he couldn’t help but grin back. “Oh yeah. Totally ending this.”

Which they did, until Jeremy had to teach Tails about the art of surrender, which usually ended in getting completely waterlogged and covered in towels while they ate popsicles on the back porch. It felt good, right, *natural*, the four of them trading good-natured barbs and reading the jokes from the popsicle sticks, that for a little while, Sonic forgot about the knot behind his ribs.

And then the sliding glass door opened and Tom stepped out onto the patio. “Seems like we had quite a bloodbath out here!”

“Do not fear, Mr. Donut,” Knuckles said quickly. “We are uninjured this day.”

Tom chuckled. “Good to know. Did you boys have fun?”

“The *most* fun!” Tails cried, springing to his feet excitedly. “You should’a seen it, Mr. Wachowski!” As he began a rapid-fire recounting of the day’s battle, he jumped up and was caught easily in the man’s arms, where he was held easily against Tom’s hip as he talked.

From his seat on the concrete, Sonic felt a crunching in his palm and glanced down. He’d snapped the popsicle stick it two with this fist. He tossed it away into the grass hurriedly.

Stupid. He didn't like getting carried anyway. He was too big for it. Tails was little, it was easy for Mom and Dad to cart him around.

But did they have to look so damn happy about it?

Beside him, Knuckles punched his shoulder. "A warrior's spirit, that one! Reveling even in defeat. Most honorable, wouldn't you say, Blue One?"

"I've got a name, you know," Sonic said, tone more biting than he'd meant. He tore up a fistful of grass for no reason.

"Ah, yes. Apologies." Knuckles fiddled with his popsicle stick. "Customs in my old tribe were far more formal than they seem to be here. I must… adjust."

The word gave Sonic pause, thinking back to the warehouse store, the conversation with Tom. "Yeah…" he sighed, tossed his fistful of grass into the yard. "Well, anyway, just 'Sonic' is fine."

"Sonic," Knuckles repeated, feeling the word on his tongue. "Sonic. Sonic."

The hedgehog snorted, a smirk tugging at his lips. "That's my name, don't wear it out." When the echidna raised an eyebrow, he shook his head. "Just an expression. That's another Earth thing you gotta get used to."

"Things are… very different now." Knuckles rested his huge hands on his knees.

"Tell me about it."

"I prefer it," the older boy declared, eyes straight ahead. "Even if it is confusing. After so much time spent in solitude, so much energy devoted to revenge, destiny… it feels like, like a…" He reached down and tugged at the tongue of his sneaker. "Like a new shoe."

"What?"

"You must know what I mean." Knuckles tapped Sonic's bright red pumas. "You go through them often enough. And when you discard the old pair, the new is often stiff, even uncomfortable. Yes?"

"Yeah, I guess. But what's that got to do-"

"This new life. New tribe. New home. It is a bit stiff. A bit uncomfortable. But I am quite sure that, in time, it will fit me very well." He smiled out at the mountains beyond the treeline. "Very well indeed."

"Huh." Sonic followed his gaze. "You know, for a guy who doesn't get metaphors, you sure can craft one."

A low rumbling laugh and Knuckles turned back to meet his eye. "I enjoyed our war game today, Sonic. Thank you for inviting me to play."

This time it was Sonic's turn to laugh, though it was tinged with embarrassment, and his gaze fell to his shoes. "Yeah, I guess it wasn't so bad. You're pretty good."

"I am the best."

"Mom said no bragging."

"Is it bragging when it's the truth?"

"'Fraid so."

"Damn."

Sonic laughed again as from above their heads, Tom said, "Language."

When it was time to go home, he didn't run. He rode in the car, in the dreaded booster seat, and convinced Maddie to put Queen on the stereo, impressing both Knuckles and Tails with *We Will Rock You*.

Dinner (hot dogs on the grill) was fun, and he didn't mind when Tails took the blue controller afterwards when they all gathered in the living room so Tom could show them what it felt like to be royally crushed at Mario Kart.

Sonic got tired of shouting directions at Tails and finally slid down from next to Maddie, squishing himself beside Tails to help him figure out the "neolithic system".

"Turn left!" Sonic yelled. "Left, left, left!"

"I'm trying!"

"You're too *slow*," Maddie sang from beside Tom, the two of them taking the lead.

Knuckles was content to watch the war before him, chomping down on popcorn.

By some miracle, Tails and Sonic wound up getting a blue shell, and Sonic taught him how to use it.

The Kit was tentative at first. "So… it'll blow up Mr. Wachowski."

"Tom, yeah. And Maddie. Come on! Use it!"

"But- but-"

"No mercy, Tails!"

"Don't listen to him, Tails!" Tom said, nearing the finish line.

"*Listen to me*," Sonic said. "Friendship overrules Dad!"

The word friendship was apparently enough for Tails to throw out his moral compass, and Tom was blown sky high as Sonic and Tails passed the finish line.

Despite his bruised Ego, Tom paraded Tails around the living room before handing him off to Maddie and snatching Sonic up, hanging him upside down by his waist.

“Hey! *Hey!* Mom, *help*!”

“You said no mercy, Sonic,” Maddie said, holding Tails squarely in her lap as he tried to squirm away to save the hanging hedgehog. She pressed a raspberry on the side of his neck until he was shrieking through giggles. “You asked for this!”

The battle ended with Sonic being tossed onto the couch, breathless with laughter, he and Tails chased screaming upstairs by a very dramatic Tom.

“If he wishes to engage in a true battle, he is not doing a very good job,” Knuckles said from the couch, scraping at the last dregs of popcorn kernels. “I could give him some training. In time, he could take down the younger two.”

Maddie ruffled the fur between his ears. “I think he’s good.”

Knuckles shrugged. “I shall depart to bedtime, then.”

From upstairs, there was more thumping and screaming. Maddie let out a sigh. “I’m going to see if I can get my three toddlers to bedtime, too.”

“You do not have three toddlers.”

“Just an expression,” she said as she hoisted herself up and off the couch.

“Ah, right.” He stood as well, then cleared his throat. “Mrs.- Er, I mean… Sonic made mention this afternoon that I have been addressing everyone too formally. Is there a manner in which you would prefer to be addressed?”

“Oh, um.” She brushed her hair back behind her ears. “Well, I guess ‘Mrs. Madeline Donut’ is quite a mouthful… Just ‘Maddie’ is fine. Whatever you want, really.” She watched him think it over, staring hard at the popcorn bowl in his hands. Of the three of them, his was the earnestness that surprised her the most.

“Sonic calls you ‘Mom’,” he said at last.

“He does.”

“But you did not birth him.”

“No, no I did not.”

“But you are his mother regardless.”

“I am.” She couldn’t help the smile, the warmth in her chest as she said it.

“You took him into your home… as you have taken the fox. And myself.”

“That’s right.”

“So you… are *my* mother, too?”

She pressed her lips together to keep from gasping. Instead, she swallowed hard, kept her voice steady and said, “If that’s what you want me to be.”

He looked up at her at last, violet eyes clear. “I think I would like that, yes.” He cleared his throat. “I feel as if I qualify as it is. You have offered your house and sustenance, as you have for Sonic.”

“Oh, honey.” Maddie kneeled onto the carpet, making sure they were eye to eye. “It’s more than that.”

He nodded. “In my tribe, it also included learning to hunt.”

From upstairs, there was a crash and more wild laughter that did not sound at all like a successful bedtime routine.

“It does not sound as if you could take care of that, but I suppose-”

“No, honey.” She grabbed his shoulders. “You know why we took in Sonic?”

“Because he could protect you. As I can.”

“No. We took him in because he’s *ours* and because we love him.” She gave his shoulders a squeeze. “Protection- that’s our job for him. And I know,” she added quickly, before he could interrupt, “I know that he could probably do that better than we could. But it’s still not his job. And it’s not yours or Tails’ either.”

“So… what is my job, then?”

“To be a kid. And to have fun. And to make mistakes and grow up and get angry at us when we tell you you’re not allowed to go out past ten. That’s your job. And…” she lowered her voice, eyes flickering up, “if you’re a part of this family, then that means you’ve got two little brothers on your tail, too.”

“Brothers in arms?”

“Just brothers, hon. To protect and annoy.”

“That sounds,” he thought hard. “That sounds *nice*.” The word sounded like it was foreign to him, but he was smiling anyway. “And how do we display this newfound family bond?”

“Hugs are usually good.”

“Ah!” His smile broadened. “Now *that* is an Earth custom I heartily enjoy.” And he nearly knocked her over with the force with which he demonstrated.

She laughed as she regained her balance, then squeezed him back as tight as she could. “You’re a good kid, Knuckles.”

“I am the be-” He cut himself off, then mumbled into her hair, “Apologies. I was bragging again.”

She turned her head just enough to kiss his temple and whisper, “I’ll allow it this time.” When she pulled back, she was surprised and pleased to see pink shading his muzzle. She tapped his nose with a forefinger. “Night, kiddo.”

He nodded, then turned and moved towards the basement door. He paused in the doorway, twisted back towards her, squared his shoulders and said, “Good night, Mother.”

She pressed a hand to her lips and blew him a kiss, was rewarded with another blush on the mighty warrior’s face before he ducked away to his room.

When Maddie finally ended up in the attic, she was greeted by the sight of her husband pinning Sonic to the floor under his back with a vengeful Tails beating Tom across the head with a pillow.

“New bedtime routine, Thomas?”

He looked up at her, having at least enough sense to look bashful, which lasted only so long until Tails smacked it away with the pillow.

Sonic reached for her. “Mom! Help me!”

“Didn’t realize bedtime included *suffocating our son*.”

“Brand new parenting technique,” Tom explained, snatching the pillow from Tails, hitting him back. “May need to try it again next time we need a quiet night.”

“*Moooom!”*

“Alright. Mom to the rescue.”

It took some doing, but Tom and Maddie finally had the two kids tucked into their respective bunks, Tom sitting on the bottom with Tails, Maddie on the ladder, elbows on Sonic’s mattress.

“You have fun today?” She pulled up the covers, pinching Sonic’s foot underneath. He kicked at her hand playfully. Below them, Tom had managed to wrangle Tails under his own covers and was quietly explaining the way his old Nintendo worked, promising that they’d try playing a different game over the weekend.

Can I be Mario next time, Tails was asking, voice small.

Course, bud. Course you can be Mario.

Sonic flinched, his hands tightening on the duvet. “Yeah…”

Maddie swallowed. She’d noticed the way his face shifted, but it was becoming harder not to notice how deep they ran. “Definitely weird having more people with Jeremy though, right?”

He shrugged, picking at loose threads on his sheets. “I guess…”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

She got another shrug in reply.

Honestly. Teenagers. They could be human or blue and faster than the speed of light, and they were all the same.

Still. She couldn’t help but remember what Cheryll had said that afternoon. The words had been biting, to say the least, and Maddie couldn’t help but feel just as suffocated as her son must have. She was reminded of Rachel, who had spent many of her early years vying for affection from parents who’d found their attention split.

But her parents and Cheryll had gotten nine months to prepare.

This was different. Quicker. Startling. She couldn’t imagine how it must feel.

Her eyes stung. If only he knew - if only he *knew* - just how much she and Tom loved him.

The idea that he might not, that he might even question-

She caught his hands. “Hey,” she said, fierce enough that his eyes finally met hers. “You’re being a big help, you know that? Getting Tails and Knuckles settled. It’s not easy.”

His eyes drifted down again to their linked fingers.

In a split second decision, she pulled herself up, stepping on the final rungs of the ladder until she was able to wriggle next to him. He made a soft noise of complaint (“there’s not enough room, Mom!”) but she squished herself in anyway and still managed to pull him tight to her side. His breaths puffed out against her neck, and his quills smelled like grass and charcoal smoke. Maddie's heart could have burst out of her chest. “Remember when you and Dad and I went to the trampoline park after your math test?”

His breath stuttered. “Yeah. Me an’ Jeremy. And I did that triple jump!”

“And your dad almost broke his back chasing you?”

Past his laughter they both heard Tom’s insulted exclamation of, “I did *not*.”

“I was thinking,” she gave his nose a tap once his laughter had tapered off, “maybe next weekend, we could go again.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. “Um… you mean… so all of us?”

“No,” she smoothed down his quills. “I was thinking just us.”

He bumped the underside of her chin tilting his head up too quickly. “Wait, *really?”*

“Really.”

“*Just* you and Dad?”

“Just me and Dad.”

“No one else?”

“Unless you want to bring Jeremy. We’ll get Wade to watch the other two. Hopefully the house won’t be too ripped up when we get back.”

His grin could have lit up the room. “*Really?”*

She pressed a firm kiss to his forehead. “Really.”

He held out his fist. “Power bump?”

Maddie touched her fist to his. “Power bump.”

Tom’s head appeared above the bed railing. “Sounds like a solid plan to me.”

Sonic twisted to face him. “But what about-”

“You know, on Friday Wade was telling me how much he’d love to have some fishing buddies the next time he goes out on the lake. And I happen to know a pair of aliens who’ve never gotten to watch Wade bait a hook.”

The hedgehog snickered. “So, for real? Just us?”

“It’s a date,” Maddie said, squeezing him close one last time, planting a kiss on his cheek before carefully maneuvering back down to the floor. “Now get some sleep.”

He stifled a yawn as Tom reached up to rub his ears. “Night you guys.”

They may have said something else, but he was already drifting off to sleep.

Car Rides and Strays

Chapter Summary

> Sonic goes to school, Tails and Knuckles go to work, and Wade thinks he's way cooler than he actually is.

Sonic never would have said it in the past, but school was an escape. Not that he didn't like school. He'd spent enough time trapped in a cave that the concept of seeing friends and learning new things was something of a privilege that he was more than aware of.

But why did some of those things need to include *algebra?*

Tails on the other hand was more than a little vocal about the whole thing when Monday morning came along and Sonic was shoveling down eggs while he flipped through the last of a short story for English.

"It's not fair!" The fox kit, usually so polite, didn't hold back the whine while he hovered at Tom's ankles as the sheriff tried to button up his uniform and drink coffee at the same time. "Why does Sonic get to go to *school!* I'd be *great* at school!"

"Yeah, bud, I know," said Tom brushing past Tails to grab his badge from the kitchen junk drawer. "But Sonic's been here longer than you, so we had time to sign him up."

"Can't I go with him?"

Sonic nearly let out a breath when Tom shook his head. "Maddie and I talked last night. You're coming with me."

"Lucky," Sonic said between another huge bite of egg. "Can I go with you?"

Tom gave him a look. Sonic quickly went back to his breakfast.

"It will not be so terrible, Small One," Knuckles said from where he was watching Maddie throw fruit into the blender with morbid fascination. "I am very interested in seeing what a… veterinary office looks like."

"Don't be," Sonic chimed in before Maddie could say anything. "That means you're in for a check up!"

Maddie rolled her eyes, tossing the last of the strawberries in before hitting blend, pushing Knuckles back from where he had his nose pressed to the glass.

"Check. Up."

“Oh yeah,” said Sonic. “Plenty of needles and electric shocks.”

“*Sonic*,” Maddie warned gently as Tails paled.

Knuckles looked more impressed than anything. “I look forward to this trial of yours, Mother.”

At the island, Sonic’s pencil slipped and his head snapped up, eyes wide.

The movement went unnoticed, as Tom screwed the top on his coffee thermos and Maddie poured out her smoothie. “It’s not nearly as bad as all that,” she said. “I just want to listen to your heart, see how much you weigh, that sort of thing.” She pointed to Tails, who tried to hide behind Tom’s legs. “You’re with me tomorrow.”

“Uh-”

“And you,” she gave Sonic a look, and put the blender pitcher in the sink. “It’ll be your turn on Friday.”

He didn’t answer, still staring at Knuckles, whose eyes hadn’t left Maddie all morning.

“Why’s Sonic gotta go!” Tails tugged at Maddie’s scrubs, looking nervously at his still winded friend, staring wide eyed at the eldest alien.

“Because he was almost crushed by a robot's foot and god knows what else that I definitely, *definitely*, want to hear about later.”

She rounded the kitchen island, giving the silent Sonic a quick kiss between the ears, saying something about *be good*, before announcing, “Alright, Knuckles. You’re with me.”

“Yes, Mother!”

“Tom-”

“On it!” Tom whisked Sonic’s forgotten plate away, handing their son his lunchbox from the fridge before managing to wrangle him into a backpack. Sonic barely blinked. Barely breathed, either, as he stared at the empty doorway where Knuckles and Maddie had been just seconds before. “Tails, you’re with me. Sonic do you want to- *Sonic*?” Tom looked back to where his son had yet to move, sitting at the kitchen island. He snapped his fingers, finally getting the hedgehog's attention. “Sonic, come on, bud, what’s the hold up!”

His son blinked.

“Come on, we’re going to be late! If you don’t move, you’ll need to run there, okay? Wade’s supposed to open the office today and I don’t know what’ll happen if I don’t get there fast, so-”

Tom fell silent when the front door opened, they were met with a torrent of rain.

“Right,” he said, looking back at Sonic. He walked swiftly over, giving Sonic’s ears a tweak.

Sonic blinked again. “Huh? What?”

Tom breathed in fast through his nose. “I said we’re going to be *late*.”

Which was how he ended up in the car besides Tails, listening to Queen's Greatest Hits and Tails’ questions about what school was like.

Tom watched in the rearview as his son stared out the window, almost oblivious to Tails’ barrage of curiosity.

“Uh huh…” Sonic mumbled as Tom drove them in the cruiser down Main Street.

“Is there a laboratory?”

“Uh huh.”

“With what sort of equipment? I read that humans have super colliders! Is there one at school?”

“Uh huh.”

“*Really?!* ”

“Don’t get too excited, Tails,” said Tom, squinting past the rain. “I think somebody’s got a case of Moody Teenager this morning.”

Sonic tuned in enough to kick the back of his chair for that one.

After that, he was able to focus a bit and told Tails about a few of the things they were learning in science. The kit even managed to get a smile out of him when he offered to help with homework. And Sonic took a little too much pleasure telling the little fox about science fairs.

“Don’t worry, Tails. You’ll be in school soon enough.”

“Really!?”

“Mmmh.” Tom took a left down Mountainview Drive, getting into a long line of cars that were slowly inching forward in the dropoff line. “Maddie and I are looking into a few elementary schools. They’ve got a few advanced programs here, too, so we’re asking around.”

When it was their time for drop-off, Sonic opened the door, stopping only when Tom gave him a look, clearing his throat. “Hey. No goodbye?”

He gave his Dad a hug from around the back of the chair, pulling away only to find Tails reaching out his own arms.

“Me too!”

Sonic rolled his eyes, but relented. Tails clung tight, tighter still when Sonic had to pull away. His ears flattened back until Sonic gave them a tweak, like Tom so often did to him. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay…”

“And hey.” He leaned in close, making sure to whisper just loud enough for Tom to hear, “Make sure to steal a few of the candy bars Dad keeps in his desk. He says he doesn’t have any there, but they’re inside the first aid box.”

Tom whipped around. “How did you know about-”

But Sonic was already out of the car, laughter swallowed up by the rain.

The first day back was surreal, what with the auditorium being closed off due to construction, and a torrent of teachers trying to answer questions about the giant robot that had taken out half of their stage and a good chunk of the gym. Thankfully, G.U.N. had offered to pay damages to the town after doing the same for their home (after apologizing profusely to the Wachowski family in particular, stumbling over themselves to avoid a very possible and drawn out lawsuit that Maddie and Tom were still considering after the whole *tasering and tossing their child into a dog carrier* incident).

The cover up had been a little easier to put in place after the last incident.

Unfortunately, the mustachioed robot had been a little harder to miss.

Cellphone videos had spread like wildfire, and had even made it so far as *Good Morning America* and so it was only a matter of time before people outside of Green Hills knew about the aliens in residence.

Not that the kids in Green Hills Middle School cared much about that. They were more concerned with the fact that their star right-fielder had absolutely destroyed a hundred foot Transformer after apparently summoning the powers of the universe. Which was the topic of the little lunch table before Sonic even sat down.

“The hero of the hour arrives!” Jeremy cheered, followed by the hoots of the rest of their little group.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sonic said, trying and failing to keep the grin from splitting his face. “It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

Jeremy looked ready to throw a carrot at his friend for even thinking to say that before the lunch monitor gave him a very pointed look, and he innocently chomped down on the carrot instead.

One of his friends, Abdul, leaned across the table to snatch at one of Jeremy’s chips. “You *literally threw down* with a robot.”

“And got chorus cancelled!” Jeremy added. “So what about those other aliens?”

“What other aliens?” A boy named Simon frowned, picking the crusts off his sandwich.

“What other- the two other *aliens* , dude! Aren’t you on TikTok?”

Sonic had been trying his very best to not bring up the changes to his house. Apparently his best friend had no such qualms.

After the required ribbing at Simon to get on TikTok, all eyes went to Sonic, who lowered his own to his juicebox. “Their names are Knuckles and Miles,” he said, carefully.

“And?” Prompted another boy, Teddy, gesturing with half an egg-salad sandwich.

“And… that’s all there is. They’re staying in my house.”

“Technically it’s their house too, my mom says,” Jeremy reported. “They’re sticking around for good.”

Which caused the next flurry of excitement and questions - *Are they from your planet? - What’re their powers? - Will they be coming to school?* - that Sonic did his best to dodge, giving curt, non-committal answers. Sonic loved his friends, but he could have absolutely run Jeremy into the ground.

“Dunno why you’re so tight-lipped about ‘em,” Jeremy said around another carrot stick. “They seem pretty awesome to me.”

To Sonic’s great relief, this statement shifted the questions to Jeremy, who was more than happy to recount their epic water-gun battle, and he was able to take a backseat and nurse his juicebox, his headache, and the nagging knot in his chest for the rest of lunch period.

Tom would never complain about having Wade around most days. Even though sometimes he stapled his tie to important documents, and he’d spilled one or two cups of coffee on their awful, century old computers, and there’d been the still-legendary Microwaved-Trout Incident.

But for all his idiosyncrasies, Wade was a good man, and more importantly, a good friend.

And so it was a relief to see him at his desk (trying to pry a staple out of his tie) when Tom walked through, Tails just behind him taking in the local sheriff's station with wide-eyed wonder.

“Tom!” The staple clinked to the floor, and the man was out of his chair before Tom could put down his backpack. “And is that my partner in crime I see?” Wade offered out his fist, and Tails jumped to meet it, the car ride all but forgotten. “So you and Tom are hanging out today? That’s cool. Wish I could do that!”

“Wade, we do that everyday.” Tom unpacked the stack of papers he and Maddie had printed out the night before. It felt like a slow day in the making as it was, and some extra time to start signing the two new residents up for school seemed like too good of an opportunity to waste. “And it’s only for a few weeks. We’re rotating.”

“Just until school!” Tails chirped.

“That’s right, bud.” Tom dragged over a spare chair next to his desk, and Tails clambered happily on. “Next time it’ll be Knuckles.”

“Aw, I can’t wait for that guy to see my *sweet police moves*.”

“Like filing the rest of that paperwork I asked you to finish last week?”

“I was thinking more like that bank robbery in Walla Walla last winter.”

“Or paperwork,” said Tom, pointing to the stack. “Besides, we stood outside that bank until the crooks up and changed their minds and surrendered.”

Wade muttered something about how *it still counts*, and then found himself with a little orange fox at his knee, looking up in admiration.

“Do you really stop robbers?”

“Do I? Oh, buddy. Wait until I tell you-”

Tom rolled his eyes fondly, half listening to a story about Wade stopping a devious scoundrel from breaking into the Green Hills Plaza. Granted, they had been called in about a break in. But it had been more of an exaggeration on the manager's part. A young mother had turned around for a minute and her toddler had broken free of the stroller long enough to crawl into one of their giant claw machines.

From what he heard, Wade’s retelling added a lot more ski masks and mustachioed villains, and how he’d received a kiss from the grateful -and single- mother at the end.

Which — yeah. Technically. If you count on the cheek. Which Wade apparently did.

The two of them fell into a quiet routine. Wade loved an audience, and Tails loved a story, and the two of them made a good pair. Tom reminded himself to let Maddie know that Wade would probably be more than happy to take on babysitting duties if the need arose.

He could already hear Sonic complaining.

And he already knew that his argument of *house sitters don’t destroy entire houses* was pretty rock solid.

The afternoon ticked on. Tails had a million other questions that Wade was happy to answer, which gave Tom space to realize just how much time at home he spent with kids. From content with none, to fulfilled with one had been a seismic shift. And now there were *three* living under their roof. He adored them, more than he thought possible, since two were so new to their little clan.

Still. It was nice, having a few minutes to himself while Wade entertained the starry-eyed eight -year-old.

He went through more of the paperwork, comparing some of the options the school had given him (they'd explained more than once that yes, even though Tails did test for college level, they'd really rather he be with kids near own age, but that accelerated classes during the school day were fine, as long as he still got to participate in gym and lunch and the occasional club), filing some meaningless complaints from his last shift, and was halfway through a traffic incident report when he looked up at the clock.

"Hey, Wade!"

Wade looked up from where he'd been pretending to finish paperwork.

"Hows about you swing by the diner and grab us lunch."

Tails spun around in his seat. "Can I get ice cream?"

"How about a hamburger." At the child's blank stare, Tom reached out and ruffled the fur between his ears. "You'll like it. Promise."

"Can *I* get ice cream?"

"No, Wade."

He handed his partner a twenty. Wade took it, mumbling about how *you're not MY dad ya know*, the office door closing softly behind him. They could hear him humming Billy Jean down the hallway, all the way out to the sidewalk.

And then it was just Tom and Tails in the office, listening to the hum of their radio and the clacking of Tom's keys.

Tom would have been happy enough in the silence too, up until he felt something tug on his shirt sleeve. He looked down. Tails had climbed down off the plastic chair and was standing just below him, looking up. "Um… Mr. Wachowski?"

"Just Tom, Tails."

Tails gnawed his lip. "Mr. Wachowski?" he said again.

Tom sighed. "Yeah, bud?"

"Are you happy we're here?"

Tom frowned, twisting his chair around to look down at the fox kit. "Course we are, bud." He reached down, and Tails gladly raised his arms so Tom could lift him up onto the desk, sitting him just beside the computer. His legs kicked back and forth, and he kept his eyes firmly on his shoes. "Why'd you ask?"

Tails shrugged. His feet swung a little faster. "Does Sonic… I mean, is Sonic happy? That we're here?"

And there it was.

Tom had to do everything in his power not to groan.

He loved his son. More than he'd loved anything. But he knew how possessive his kid could be, especially over them. It came from years of being alone.

But looking down at the child on the desk, legs swinging almost violently back and forth, it would seem as if trauma was not a unique trait in their house anymore.

"Course he's happy." Tom reached out and gently grabbed Tails' legs before he could rattle anything off the desk. "It's just an adjustment period. That's all."

Tails didn't look any more convinced.

"Just give him time," Tom said again. He frowned. "Did Sonic say anything to you? You know you could tell me, right?"

"No! No, he- it's just-" His legs tried to swing again, but in Tom's grip they just nudged back and forth. "It's only that, Mr. Wachowski, Sir, that I don't want to… I don't know… I don't want to mess up anything, you know? Especially because it's his house-"

"Tails, it's not just-"

"And," Tails continued quickly, not stopping to listen, "it's just that I've *done* adjustment periods before and they- they don't go well. Ever. And if it's going to end that way - I just mean that if it's going to be like the *last* adjustment period- it's only that the grownups from before told me that they needed to adjust to me. Does that make sense? And then they didn't, Mr. Wachowski. They really, really *didn't* , and that's okay, but if he can't, I mean if *you* can't, you can tell me *now* and-"

"Wait- *wait*. Pause." Tom squeezed the kit's leg, and Tails finally stopped to take a breath. "What do you mean the *grownups from before*?"

"From my- from where I was before." Twin tails curled into the boy's lap and he stroked them absently. "I didn't- my parents, I didn't know them. I was, um, I don't know if there's an earth word for it, but I grew up in a home for, uh, *strays*, I guess. But the other kids, they didn't like me. Thought I was weird. Which I am. And the grownups. They said what you said. But even *they*, I mean, nobody would play with me, what else was I gonna do but hang around and overhear stuff, right?" The palms of his gloves were covered with orange fur and he shook it off, brow furrowed.

"Tails-" Tom started.

"They tried to find a place for me," the little fox continued. "Over and over they packed up my stuff and told me, like you said, that everyone just had to adjust. To wait. To not push too hard. Then…" He gave a tiny shrug, trying to play it off like it didn't bother him, even as the orange fur clung to his fingers. "Couple months later, we'd do it all over again."

Tom sucked in a breath, searching for the words to respond.

“I just want to make sure,” Tails said, quickly, trying to hide the tightness in his soft voice. “If- if that’s what’ll happen, you can- you can tell me. I’ve done it before. It’s okay, Mr. Wachowski. Really.”

“It’s *not* okay.”

Tom didn’t mean to snap, the kit flinching back, and he softened his voice as best as the fire in his gut would allow. “Tails, that’s not- they didn’t-” Tom scrubbed at his hair, letting out a watery sigh. “Did Sonic ever tell you where he came from?”

“We’re from the same-”

“On *Earth.* Did he tell you where he came from on Earth.”

Tails slowly shook his head.

“He was living in the woods. He doesn’t like to talk about it much, and if he does, he’ll play it off like it was some sort of adventure, but it’s all talk.” Reaching out, he took the smaller hands in his own, and Tails clung. It would seem as if they both needed an anchor for this conversation.

Big words, Sonic would bitterly call them.

“I’m honestly not even sure what it was like half the time he was out there. He won’t tell me the worst stuff yet, but we’ve guessed. There are scars, the inside *and* the outside kind, and one day I really, really hope he’ll tell us all about them. But I do know that he spent a lot of time around our house, playing pretend.”

“… pretending what?” Tails’ eyes were wide, filled with untethered grief.

“That he had a family, mostly. With me and Maddie. He’d hang out under the porch when he was really little, watch movies through the windows. Maddie thought there were stray cats for years, and she used to leave food out, but he told us stories about scavenging through town and-” he stopped himself quickly. Tails didn’t need to know about that. About the sort of anxieties Tom had stored away. The fear of his son weathering winters and starvation.

“The point is,” Tom said, squeezing the small fingers once, twice, three times, “Sonic… he’s got his own sort of hang ups that don’t have anything to do with you or Knuckles, just like you’ve got the same sort of things that hurt you. It’s not an excuse, and I’ll talk to him, but I just think it’ll be good for you to know. Alright?”

“So… do you think he’s… he’s alright with me being at his house?”

“It’s your house too. And yeah. But I think he’s been stuck having a whole lot of nothing and wanting something for so long, and sharing is gonna be hard.”

The duel tails twitched, the fox kit mulling over what Tom said, thinking hard. Finally, he looked down at their connected fingers. “Do you think Knuckles knows?”

“Maybe.”

“What if he doesn't?”

“Then Maddie or I will talk to him about it, just like this.”

“Won’t that make Sonic angry?”

“Maybe. But in our house, we talk about what’s bothering us.”

Tails sniffled, pulling one of his hands away to swipe the back of his glove against his nose. His other hand stayed tight in Tom’s. “Do you think Sonic’s sad?”

“Why d’ya say that?”

“Because when I think about- when I think about *before*, I get sad.”

Tom didn’t know what else to do besides pull the kit off the desk and into a tight hug. “Yeah,” he said, moving a hand up and down Tails’ back. “Sometimes I do think he gets sad. And hopefully one day he’ll tell me and Maddie more. But for now? He’s got us. And so do you and Knuckles. And that’s not changing. Okay?”

He felt Tails nod bunch up his shirt. “So… he’ll adjust?”

“He’ll adjust,” said Tom.

“Promise?”

“It took him months to stop thinking me and his mom were just really good friends having an extra long sleepover. I promise. He’ll adjust.”

Tails’ laugh was watery, and Tom could feel the moisture building through his shirt. He gave the kid a squeeze just as Wade’s humming came back around the corner, the front door opening from somewhere down the hall.

“What did I miss!” Wade looked suspiciously between the two, more emotional than when he’d left them.

Tom wiped Tails’ eyes off on his own sleeve. “Nothin’ much, Wade. Just telling him about your epic escape by moose attack.”

“Hey! That moose was a *jerk*.”

“You threw your sandwich at it.”

By the time they were all together again, eating burgers out of cardboard boxes, Tails had all but forgotten to worry about awkward car rides and instead was busy tugging off his ketchup stained gloves at Tom’s insistence, devouring his burger like it was the Gods’ ambrosia.

“Can we have this *every night*,” he said, as Tom reached over to wipe his face.

“No dice, kid. But wait until I grill up my world famous steak. You’re gonna lose your mind.”

Counting Down the Days

Chapter by Humanities_Handbag

The weather cleared up by Tuesday, which saved Sonic from having to ride in the car to school for the rest of the week.

It *didn't* save him from having to sit at the coffee table, *trying* to do homework, while Knuckles and Tails swapped stories of check-ups and Wade-antics.

"My muscle density is 'unlike anything on Earth'!" Knuckles thumped his chest with his fist. "Mother said so."

"It's still scientifically impossible to be a million percent muscle," Tail said between bites of the apple Maddie had given him for an afternoon snack.

"We must agree to disagree."

" *Nooo* , a hundred percent is as high as you can go! And you have bones! And fur!" Tail raised a hand and pointed at the echidna's head. "And *something* up there between your ears, I assume."

"Obviously more muscle," Knuckles said unironically.

"Obviously." Tails rolled his eyes.

"Could you guys take this someplace else?" Sonic grumbled, pencil digging a divot into his math notebook.

"Oooh, algebra!" The little fox brightened, sliding down from the couch to peer over Sonic's shoulder at the textbook.

"Al-ja-who?" Knuckles asked, also leaning forward to take a peek.

"It's a subset of mathematics where symbols, like letters of the alphabet, represent numbers or members of a specified set," Tails recited, as if he were reading from a dictionary. "They're used to represent quantities and express relationships that hold for all members of the set."

Knuckles blinked at him. "I understood nothing of what you just said."

"Boys!" Maddie called from the kitchen. "Let Sonic work and come help me unload the groceries."

"Coming Mother!"

"Sure thing, Mrs. Wa- Mad- uh, Mom."

Sonic cringed, and hated himself for it, as the pair of them left the room.

They weren't doing anything wrong. Not really.

So why did his fur stand on edge whenever he heard them use those words?

Why did the awful knot in his chest tighten each time Mom's laugh drifted in from the kitchen?

With a grunt, he slammed his book shut and took it upstairs.

On Wednesday evening, Sonic made the realization that sharing a room was, in fact, the exact opposite of awesome.

"I don't get why I can't just go upstairs!"

"You can, bud," Tom said, voice hinging on frustration as he explained the situation to his son for what must have been the hundredth time in the span of thirty minutes. "We said you could."

"You said I could go up *quietly* ."

"Because Tails' bedtime is earlier."

"But *why* ?"

"Take a wild guess."

Sonic glared at his father's back from where he was tying off the trash bag, Ozzie sitting patiently at his side, waiting for his walk.

"It's *my room* ," Sonic explained again, hoping his dad might see some sort of sense. "I should get to go up and do… do whatever!"

"Sonic."

"It's not fair!"

"Yeah, well, like it or not we're a little short on space. And if I remember correctly, *you* elected to share the room."

"I take it back. I don't want him there anymore."

"Uh huh. And where are we putting Tails, exactly?"

"With *Knuckles* !"

"His bedtime is later than yours. Unless you'd like to share with *him* ."

Sonic looked aghast that his father would even suggest such a thing.

“All my stuff is upstairs! And- and I can’t use any of it because Tails is such a *baby* who can’t stay up an extra hour-”

“ *Sonic* .”

The hedgehog swallowed, staring at the floor. His parents scolded him from time to time, but it wasn’t often that they got to the point of being angry at him. And he could feel Tom teetering on that edge.

Despite the way it hurt, he almost wanted to see what would happen if he pushed the man off.

Still, he furrowed his brow and kept his mouth shut, Tom’s eyes burning holes through the top of his head.

“I don’t know what else to tell you. You wanted to share the room, and we’re not changing that now. So find something else to do for an hour down here. Or at least try and be *helpful* and take Ozzie for a walk.”

“But-”

“We’re not going over this again.” The trash bag came out of the can with a *thwip* , and Tom strode to the back door, footsteps heavier than usual. “You’re a big kid. Figure it out. And take Ozzie for a walk.”

Being outside, the house behind him glowing with its lit windows, it was almost like he was twelve years old again trying to catch a glimpse of the family inside. Ozzie trailed in front, sniffing at the grass and trees, trotting happily along.

“So stupid,” Sonic hissed, kicking at a rock.

At least when he’d lived in his cave, he could do what he wanted when he wanted. Now he was on the outside and his stuff was being held ransom by an eight year old with a bedtime.

“So, so stupid,” he said again to the trees, stomping along the path, not daring to look at the house getting smaller behind him.

Thursday was somehow able to throw him for yet another loop. He jogged up the driveway after school to the sounds of metal clanking and his father’s laughter coming from the garage. He detoured from his usual snacks-and-homework routine, winding his way around to peek in the open door, where he found Tom’s work boots sticking out from beneath the minivan.

“You see that?” the man’s voice floated out.

“Uh huh.”

“Make sure it’s tight.”

“Got it.”

“You sure you’re not just humoring your old man? I know you’ve built things way more complex than a combustion engine.”

“Are you kidding? I’d never seen an engine that still runs on fossil fuels before I came to Earth! This is fascinating!”

Sonic cleared his throat. “Knock knock.”

It was a small relief, the welcoming sounds the both of them made as they rolled out from beneath the van, sporting matching grease stains and matching smiles.

“Sonic!” Tails beamed. “I didn’t realize how late it was. We’ve been out here since lunch. We changed the oil! It’s made out of dinosaurs!”

Tom chuckled, wiping his hands with a rag. “How was school, bud?”

“Fine.” Sonic shrugged. The backpack straps were digging into his shoulder and he wished he’d dumped it inside. “And since when does Tails just *change oil?* I thought you’d get him to… I don’t know… put rockets on the loser cruiser.”

“Can’t live up to its name with rockets, bud.” Tom reached into a nearby cooler, grabbing a water bottle, twisting off the top, and handing it to an already reaching Tails. “Besides, it’s been on my list since a few weeks ago, and Tails isn’t in school yet. He needed something to take up the time.”

“And it’s *fun!”*

Sonic ignored the fox kit, hiking his backpack straps higher to stare up at his dad. “I thought you were going to show *me* how to change oil.”

Tom grabbed another water bottle for himself. “Not like you were tripping over yourself to do it, bud.”

“So? You always get me to do stuff I don’t like!”

His father frowned. “I thought you’d be thrilled. Tails *wanted* to help. Take it as your Boring Dad Freebie.”

Sonic wasn’t sure how to find the words to explain that he would have given anything for all the boring dad activities. He would have gone fishing if Tom had asked. Would have walked through every car lot and looked at each of the minivans. Would have even been willing to actually *laugh* at his terrible jokes, the way that Tails did so sincerely it made Tom grin.

Or maybe he did have the words for all that, but they felt too cutting to say out loud.

Did you give up on me, or have you just forgotten I’m here?

“Yeah. Totally,” he said, stepping backwards. “That’s- that’s awesome. Didn’t want to change any oil anyway.”

“I mean, if you wanted to help-”

“That’s fine,” he did his best to smile, waving off whatever pity invitation his dad was about to unleash. “I spent the last hour in math. Don’t need any more boring in my life, thank you very much.”

“I’m so jealous!” Tails rocked back on his heels while Tom lifted the hood of the car. “I wish I was in math already…” His tails twitched, fists tucking beneath his chin when he exclaimed, “oh! But guess what! Mom and Dad found a *school* and we’re visiting it tomorrow!”

Sonic said something, he must have, because the pair of them kept talking, but he couldn’t hear any of it over the static buzzing in his ears. Tails climbed up to sit on the edge of the car hood, gazing up at Tom like he’d pulled the moon from the sky.

Which he could have, as far as Sonic was concerned.

He just never thought that it wouldn’t be for him.

On Friday, when he scanned the car line at the end of the school day, it wasn’t Maddie’s SUV he spotted. Instead, she was in the passenger seat of the minivan. The whole lot of them were packed in, waving at him from open windows.

Sonic was barely over the whiplash from the garage and had been hoping to avoid the memory altogether. And yet here it was; oil changed and full of intruders who didn’t know how to respect someone else’s life. “What’s goin’ on?” he asked warily from the curb.

“We’re gonna go see my new school!” Tails bubbled from his carseat. “C’mon!”

“Thought you would’ve been done with that already,” he saidd as he pulled the door open, tossed his backpack in.

“We thought it would be more fun to do it together,” Maddie told him.

“And we’ll grab an early dinner out afterwards,” Tom added.

Well.

That didn’t sound *too* awful.

Sonic shut the door and climbed up into his booster beside Tails. “What about my homework?” The rule had always been to get it done Friday afternoon, to leave the weekend open, especially with baseball season on the horizon.

“We should be home well before bedtime,” Maddie said, twisting to make sure he was buckled in. “And if we’re not, I’ll write you a note that you had family obligations.”

Huh.

He found himself grinning, even when the kids who had been watching ran up to the car, Tails leaning out the window to chirp his hellos, giving Jeremy a high five when he came up to say goodbye.

Dinner out and possibly skipped homework?

Maybe there were some upsides to kid brothers after all.

From the third row, Knuckles leaned forward. “Sonic, Father insists that there exists a ‘never-ending pasta bowl’. Is this more Earthen sorcery, or does he speak true?”

The hedgehog chuckled. “Something tells me Mom and Dad are gonna get their money’s worth tonight.”

The tour was quick (despite the bazillion questions Tails asked the principle) and dinner was great (Knuckles discovered that Olive Garden’s definition of never-ending did *not* match his own, but was persuaded out of a rage when they printed him out a certificate that declared he had bested the pasta bowl). And Tails’ early bedtime -which had frustrated him earlier- meant he got to hang out on the couch and explain Brooklyn 99 to Knuckles with Mom and Dad on either side of them.

“I like the big one,” the echidna declared, pointing when Terry Crews came on screen.

“Course you do,” Tom chuckled.

One episode in and the mountain of carbs finally caught up with him, Knuckles trudging off to bed, leaving just the three of them on the couch. Tom scooted closer. “You tuckering out yet, bud?”

“Who, me?” Sonic asked. “No way.”

“One more episode,” Maddie said, picking up her mug from the coffee table and blowing on it. “Then it’s light’s out.”

Sonic opened his mouth to protest but a yawn slipped out instead. “Okay, that’s fair.”

She hummed a little laugh and slipped one arm around his middle. “Not such a bad day, right?”

“Guess not.”

“And don’t forget, tomorrow it’s trampoline park time,” Tom said.

Feeling more right than he had all week, Sonic let himself relax back against his parents. “Tomorrow”

Smoke Alarms and Burned Bridges

Chapter Summary

In which the best-laid plans go awry.

Chapter Notes

Invader_Sam Author's Note: Just wanted to pop in and say Humanity and I have been blown away by the response to this fic! Your continued support is sending us over the moon and making us want to write CONSTANTLY, haha! So guess what? That's what we've been doing! So you get a new chapter today! Enjoy! ^_^

When the smoke detector blaring through the house served as his alarm clock Saturday morning, Sonic knew the day he'd been dreaming of was shot. Head damn near splitting open, he ran downstairs, hands pressing his ears tight to his skull. "What the heck-"

The kitchen was so full of smoke it was as if a fog had rolled in. Tails was sitting on a ledge next to an open window, twin tails spinning, sucking the smoke out into the yard. Tom was stomping on what looked like it had once been his hoodie, beneath which lay the source of the fire.

At the kitchen island, Maddie was trying to coax Knuckles into showing him the arm he was currently cradling against his side.

"I'm *fine*," he said through gritted teeth.

"Then let me see it."

He curled away from her reach. "That's not-" The movement caused him to hiss, wincing.

"Knuckles, please."

"It's no less than I deserve," he growled. "I let my pride mislead me and I've- I've ruined your home- *again*."

Tom was up on a chair now, pressing the button to silence the alarm.

As the smoke cleared and the quiet filled the room, Sonic watched.

Maddie blinked hard. “Baby, no. No. It was an accident. You don’t *deserve* to be hurt because you made a mistake.”

The echidna turned to look at her, eyes wide. “But I-”

Tom hopped down from the chair, moved to sit in it beside them. “But nothing. Accidents happen. We learn from them, we fix what we can, and we move forward.”

“Please let me see your arm,” Maddie said again.

Gingerly, he did as she asked. Tails, who had just climbed up to sit on the island, made a distressed little squeak.

A patch of fur on his forearm had been completely burned off, and the skin beneath was an angry pink laced with black.

Tom sucked in a breath. “Hoo boy.”

Maddie took the gloved hand carefully in both of hers. “Go grab my bag, will you, babe?”

Tom pushed up from the chair, and strode from the room. In the doorway, he paused beside Sonic, patted his head. “He’ll be okay. Don’t worry.”

The hedgehog’s stomach turned. He didn’t like seeing Knuckles hurt. He *didn’t*. But the reason he’d been looking so crestfallen was entirely selfish. So now he felt guilty on top of everything.

So much for a good weekend.

Maddie took Knuckles to the clinic.

Tom cleaned up the kitchen, and then declared that they’d need to replace the scorched hood. Which was how Sonic wound up strapped into the booster seat next to Tails on the way to the hardware store a town over.

He tried to force himself to cheer up. Tails had never been to the hardware store and was beyond excited to see what Earth tools looked like. But trips like this used to be just him and Dad. They were fix-it buddies. They knew the lumber guy by name, and the girl who worked at the paint counter always had candy she said she *only* shared with him. But who knew? Maybe it would be *fun* to show Tails the ropes.

It kind of was.

It was no trampoline park, to be sure, but they wound up getting to explore while Tom talked to a guy at the appliance section. And Tails flew them up to the rafters, which he’d never thought to do before, so they could take in the whole store. They found a nest with baby robins in it, which was neat. They played ‘Sunday Dads’ in the patio furniture display area, pretending to grill things and mimicking Tom when he tried to talk sports. The girl behind the paint counter had snickers bars for the both of them.

They got a ping from Tom on Sonic's phone that he was checking out and as they made their way to the register, they saw he was chatting with someone in line. Someone Sonic recognized.

Judge Ramierez.

"...hard not to notice a mustachioed robot the size of the Empire State Building," she was saying. "I assume it had something to do with your boy….s." She added the 's' as the two approached, then raised an eyebrow at Tom.

The Donut Lord glanced down, chuckling. "Yeah, we're thinking of putting a 'Home For Wayward Aliens' sign above the front door."

Bemused, she nodded. "So… two now."

"Three, actually. The oldest is with my wife."

Her eyes widened. "Quite a full house." She turned to the boys, smiling. "Nice to see you, Sonic."

The hedgehog couldn't help but grin. The woman was associated with the absolute best day of his life, after all. "Hi." He felt someone grab his hand, and turned. Tails was behind him, peeking out behind the quills. "This is Miles, but everybody calls him Tails."

She nodded. "Nice to meet you, Miles."

The fox kit squeaked out a tiny, "Hullo."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Uh, eight, ma'am."

She looked back at Tom. "And the elder?"

"Oh! Um, he's sixteen."

"And he's not here, because…?"

Before either child could say a word, Tom butted in to quickly say, "He's with Maddie right now taking a tour of her office. Getting a checkup."

"But-" Tails piped up. Sonic grabbed his hand hard, and the kit went silent.

Judge Ramirez nodded. "That's good. Good of you to do now, especially if you're looking to move forward. And you are, I'd assume."

Tom blinked. "Sorry. Move forward?"

"Hm." She tapped the strap of her purse. "I'll have to get the packets to you quickly, then."

"The-" Tom started.

“Eighteen is the threshold, after all,” she said matter-of-factly. “And processing two adoptions at once is going to take a bit more time. We’ll want to expedite things as best we can.”

Behind him, Tails whispered. “What’re they talking about?”

The knot in Sonic’s chest squeezed tight, but he didn’t let go of Tails’ hand. “I’ll tell ya later,” he whispered back.

Beside them, Tom was stumbling through the conversation, managing to nod in the right places and grunt occasionally. Judge Ramierez gave him a plethora of instructions and then, at last, realized they were holding up the checkout line and let them move forward to complete their purchase.

Tom let out a breath as she walked away. “I tell you what, boys. I’m glad she’s on *our* side. She does *not* mess around.”

Sonic nodded, rubbing at his chest with his free hand.

The clinic was open for special hours, and so it was empty besides a few of the techs working behind the desk, filing cases to catch up on the week's work. They looked up when Maddie and Knuckles walked in, standing to greet them before noticing the ice pack held tight against Knuckles’ arm.

“Aw, honey, what happened?” Linda rounded the desk, kneeling in front of Knuckles to take a peek, hissing sympathetically at the patch of charred skin. “Oh jeez. You playing with matches or something?”

“Breakfast accident,” Maddie explained. “Which, actually, could you bring some stuff to my office, Lin?”

She was on it, giving Knuckles’ head a quick pat before dashing off to the back rooms.

The other techs expressed their concern as the two passed. They’d all met Knuckles a few times from his visits to the office before, and all collectively adored him. He loved being there. Especially when he got to hold the new rescue kittens and puppies that came through before adoptions and fostering. He was surprisingly gentle when he wanted to be.

Maddie’s room was down the hall. She shared it with a few of the other vets, and so their family pictures intermingled on the wall with hers. Human children and adults on camping trips and Disneyland vacations beside a gaggle of alien children out for ice cream and smiling from deck chairs at barbecues. One of Sonic’s latest trophies was on the desk, right beside a picture that Tails had drawn a few days ago of the three of them.

Knuckles was surprised to see his own drawing pinned to the wall as well. A diorama of himself that he’d given to Tails as proof of his physical build. He’d labeled every bit of his drawn body with MUSCLE and MORE MUSCLE and EVEN MORE MUSCLE.

Tails hadn't bought it.

He'd tossed it away after that. Or thought he had. Because there it was, right above the desk.

"Alright, sweetheart. We're gonna give this a good look." Climbing to sit on top of the steel table, he glanced away as Maddie pulled on gloves, gently easing the ice pack off his skin. He winced. "Sorry, hon. We're gonna put some stuff on that, okay?"

"I am fine," he insisted.

She pulled a cart over towards her, fiddling with the settings on an electric razor. "Knuckles. We talked about this-"

"We did. And I still insist; this is what I deserve."

The razorhead clicked into place, and Maddie looked up with a sigh. "Knuckles-"

"I nearly destroyed your house. Again. And…" his face pinched, and he looked as if he were doing everything in his power to keep from glancing away. Warriors never averted their eyes in shame. "And I know that-" He grimaced over the next word, "-*tending* to me was not the way you had planned to spend your day."

Oh-so-carefully she clipped away the fur surrounding the burn, before shearing off a wider circlet. "What are you talking about?"

"The paper book, the one you use to mark the days, up in the kitchen." Brow furrowed, he watched her work. "Sonic had written on the square for this day. You were- you and Father had made plans. With him. Plans that are now thwarted by my incompetence."

She clicked the razor off. "Knuckles, it was an accident."

"Accidental or not, the consequence remains. Now you are *here* instead of where you should be." Violet eyes shining, he turned them down at last, unable to bear it. "I should have left."

"Knuckles-"

"I should have taken the Emerald and gone home," he said, voice thick and wobbly. "It was foolish, *childish* of me to think I could-"

He was cut off by her hands on his cheeks, lifting his face to hers. "You *are* home," she told him, dark eyes fierce.

"I-"

"*This* is home. With *us*."

Her thumbs brushed his muzzle, swiping at tears he'd been too weak to hold in. He bit his lip, no longer trusting himself to speak.

“And I don’t care if you’re the Most Feared Warrior in the galaxy,” she continued. “You. Are still. A *child*. *Our* child.”

“Mother,” he gasped out, uninjured arm grasping for her. “I’m sorry-”

“Uh uh, none of that.” Mindful of the burn, she drew him in, let him hide his face in her shoulder. “Nope nope nope.”

“But-”

“Nope.”

“But I-”

“Nope.”

Against her wet t-shirt, he felt him laugh weakly. “You are quite stubborn.”

“Like mother, like son.” Another shaking laugh and she felt his breathing slow. Kissing the top of his head, she let him collect himself another moment. “I still have to clean that burn. Think I could give it a try?”

He nodded, and straightened back up, swiping his nose with the back of his glove.

She reached back for the tissues, wiping down his face as he swung his feet, looking more his age than she could ever remember seeing him. “I am still regretful that I ruined Sonic’s day. He has been *territorial* ever since our arrival.”

“Yeah, he has, hasn’t he…” She grabbed a clean cotton swab, popping the top off a bottle of saline. “It’s been hard on him. Not that it’s an excuse, but these sorts of changes aren’t the easiest for Sonic to get through.”

“Change is a part of nature.”

“Wise words for someone who nearly took out the TV last week.”

“The false weather god spoke *lies*. It was not meant to rain.”

She flicked him between the eyes before gently patting down the burn, careful of the pressure when he hissed again. “I’m just saying, you and him have a lot in common. He’s lost a lot. And change is hard for him, because when things go wrong he just… I don’t know… he feels it deeper than a lot of other kids might.”

Knuckles watched her work, thoughtful. “Sonic has been… *yours* for over a year, correct?”

“Mm-hmm.” She rolled her chair over to the cabinet, pulled out a roll of gauze and spray disinfectant.

“That is a significantly longer time than Tails or I- and I cannot speak for the kit, but already, in such a short span, I feel-” He paused, muzzle pink. “-attachment, stronger than anything I

have felt since my tribe was…" He trailed off, shook his head, as if to clear the painful memories away. "What I mean to say is, if I find myself so intensely attached, surely Sonic must be a hundredfold moreso."

She put the gauze on the table beside him, popped the top off the disinfectant. "You know, for the Galaxy's Mightiest Warrior, you're pretty on the ball with all this feelings stuff."

He chuckled and she used the distraction to spray the burn.

It wasn't quite enough of a distraction, though, as he yelped and yanked his arm away.

"Sorry."

He grunted, then took a sharp breath. "I trust," he said through gritted teeth, "that *that* was necessary, as the rabies shot was?"

"'Fraid so."

"Very well." He gave her back his arm. As she began to wrap up the wound, he went back to the subject at hand. "I understand where Sonic is coming from. I, myself, find it difficult to share your attention. But I am at a loss as to a solution."

She worked quietly for a moment, the both of them focused before she spoke again. "When we adopted Sonic, I told him that it felt like he'd *always* been ours. We'd just been waiting around until he found us. I won't speak for my husband, but I think Tom would agree with me that it's the same for you and Tails." She pinned the gauze with her thumb, taking a moment to look up at him. "He's been with us for longer. But it doesn't mean I love you two any less or more. He's *feeling* a lot because he's trying to *work through* a lot . Home hasn't always been a permanent thing for him."

"We have that in common, I suppose."

"Like I said."

"Still. I am regretful."

She finished wrapping the gauze, taping it tight. "If I tell you something, will you promise to keep it secret?"

His eyes widened, burn forgotten. "On my honor as a warrior."

Her smile was soft as she gathered up all of her supplies. "Tom and I never planned on having kids."

Knuckles blinked. "You and Father *are* parents."

"We are. But it wasn't a part of our plans originally." She shrugged, turning around and opening cabinets. "We both loved our independence, and we were so *busy*. Between vet school, Tom's job, taking on extra work- the time we did have together, we spent *together*. Bringing a kid in meant that we'd need to miss out on a lot of that."

“And now you have Sonic?”

“And the two of you.” The cabinet closed, and she turned around, leaning against the desk. “And it was an adjustment. It meant we couldn’t go out as much, and what we did outside of the house had to change. I still remember; one of the first nights Tom and I wanted to go out again, after taking Sonic in. He booked this great restaurant and we had tickets to a concert just out of town. And then, wouldn’t you know it, Sonic ended up with some sort of a flu.”

“I assume your night did not proceed as intended?”

“Bingo. We ended up spending the night on the bathroom floor. We didn’t even have time to change. Tom’s favorite shirt got wrecked.”

“You must have been disappointed.”

She pushed off the counter, turning around to open a drawer. “You know, I remember a lot of things that night. I remember being worried, and relieved, and happy that we were there for him, because he’d probably been sick before completely alone, and that scares the hell out of me. But I don’t really remember being disappointed. Sonic, though? Oh! The poor kid was *so worried* we’d be angry. Spent the whole night apologizing when he wasn’t bent over the toilet.”

She remembered that night too well. Kneeling next to the toilet in her new dress, Tom rushing from the room to change and find whatever fever reducers they had in the hall closet, so thankful they'd begun to stock up on medicine from the children's aisle early. It had been long before Sonic had called them mom or dad, but she and Tom hadn't bothered to put up any sort of pretense and called their respective offices that night to let them know that their son was sick and they wouldn't be in the next day.

They'd migrate to the living room floor, awake until the early hours, watching whatever cartoons were running on cable. Tom with a bucket and her with a cold washcloth on Sonic's forehead.

Their first night out in months had been shot all to hell and they couldn't have cared less. “But every time he apologized, we just told him that it was okay. Because we were worried about *him* and that’s all that mattered.”

“Ah.” Knuckles nodded. “I see the purpose of your anecdote.”

“Figured you would. Sonic might be bummed now. But you’re his brother, and family comes first. It just might take him some extra time to get there. And if I know Sonic, and I do, he’ll get there. He’s one of the sweetest kids. And he’s also one of the most scared. And I think it wouldn’t be such a bad thing for you to try and reach out to him. He could use some love from another person who gets him.” She turned again, brandishing a handful of lollipops. “Now the bravest of warriors can receive their rewards.”

He perked up, beaming. “Is that grape?”

“Sure is, big guy.”

“A worthy reward!”

On the ride home from the hardware store, Tails asked. “What was that all about, Mr.- er, Dad? Who was that lady? What’s adoption?”

“Oh, uh. Hoo, boy, we’re really doin’ the speedrun this time around, huh?” Tom said, eyes on the road. “So. That woman was a judge, an official in the Earth’s legal system. And a little while ago, she helped us adopt Sonic. And by that I mean, we made him part of our family. Under the law.”

When Tails looked puzzled, Sonic added, “On Earth, they’re *obsessed* with paperwork.”

“He’s not wrong,” Tom chuckled.

“So we’re… not a part of the family?” the fox asked, ears pinned back.

“Just not legally.” Tom slowed at a red light “We went through all of this with Sonic last year. It makes things more clear. But in our hearts, you guys are already family.” He twisted in his seat to look at Sonic. “Right, bud?”

Sonic looked at his father, and then over at Tails. The knot in his chest loosened, just a little. “Course we are.”

Tails chewed his lip. “So… does that mean that it’ll happen for me an’ Knuckles? Like for Sonic?” His feet were swinging, the heels of his shoes bumping anxiously against the bottom of his carseat.

“That’s what she wants us to do,”

The kicking stuttered. “Um… and… and is it what *you* want, too?”

Above the car, the light turned green but they didn’t move. A car behind them beeped, but Tom just waved them around, keeping his eyes on the two boys in the back seat. Sonic couldn’t remember the last time his Dad had ever looked so serious. “Maddie- Mom and I have a lot of talking to do,” he said. “The last process was a lot of work, and a lot of time.” He fixed Sonic with a steady gaze that made the hedgehog suddenly feel very small. “But it was *worth* that time, because we got something great out of it, and we’d do it again. So, I guess what I’m saying is, yeah. It’ll take time, and don’t expect it to happen right away. But yes. We want that. Very much.”

Despite the way their day had started, despite the fact that Knuckles was with Maddie for a painful accident, despite the fact that Sonic’s chest was doing all sorts of twisting loops, despite his own fear about his parents drifting further and further away from him, there was something raw about the way Tails was looking at both him and Tom just then, and Sonic had to wonder if he’d looked the same way when he’d found out.

He wasn’t sure what exactly came over him, but he grabbed at Tails’ hand again.

Knuckles and Maddie were back by the time Tom pulled them into the driveway.

“Knuckles!” Tails scurried over to the kitchen island where Knuckles was sitting on one of the barstools, flipping through a comic with his good arm. The other was settled on the tabletop, wrapped in a loose, white bandage.

The echidna smiled, “Good afternoon, little one. Were you successful in your quest for a new hood?”

“Yup,” Tails giggled. “How’s, um, how’s your arm?”

The older boy shifted in his seat, frowning. “It will heal.”

Quickly, the fox climbed up onto an empty seat. “Does it hurt?”

“Healer Linda gave me a potion for the pain.”

“Baby aspirin,” Maddie whispered to Tom as he put the rest of their bags down.

Tom turned around to hide his laugh before going to grab his toolbox from the garage.

Sonic stayed off to the side until Knuckles finally made enough eye contact with the middle child to encourage him over. “I hope your journey was not too arduous, brother.”

“If you don’t count Dad’s singing, then yeah, it was fine.” He gestured awkwardly towards where Tails was hovering anxiously around a struggling Tom, lifting off the old oven hood. “We got everything we needed. So. All good. And- and I’m… glad you’re okay.”

“Many thanks for the concern.” Knuckles reached out with his good arm and placed a hand on Sonic’s shoulder. “I am regretful that I took time from your day, brother, but I am grateful for your assistance in Father’s quest.”

“Oh, yeah. No biggie.”

“It is quite the *Biggie*.” He squeezed Sonic’s shoulder gently, aware of his own strength. “It is good to have the support of a family again.”

Sonic blinked against furrowed brows, opening his mouth as if he wanted to ask a question, but was cut short by the oven hood slamming to the ground. They all jumped.

“Thomas Wachowski, do *not* scuff my new floors!” Maddie stomped past Tails, helping her husband lift the hood onto their island.

“It’s *heavy,* Mads! And look, it didn’t even leave a dent.”

“You scuff these floors, and I’ll dent you. Now lift with your legs!”

“I think that’s our exit,” Sonic whispered, and before Knuckles could do much more, he’d already zipped out of the room.

Would Someone Stop the Ride? I Wanna Get Off.

Chapter Summary

In which Sonic tries to be okay, which turns out to be harder than he'd imagined.

The weekend was trampoline-less, and Knuckles kept trying to corner him and *talk* which was weird and awkward, but all-in-all, it could've been worse. The weather was good, and Mom and Dad gave him permission to go on a long run Sunday morning, which helped loosen the knot in his chest. And then Dad grilled steaks for dinner, which was always amazing, and he schooled everyone in Mario Kart before bed.

He'd gone to sleep feeling alright. Content, almost.

Maybe it had just been a bad first week.

It could only get better from here, after all.

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.

.

Or so he'd thought.

The week began with the other two officially starting their own educational careers, which he'd assumed would be a good thing. Less time spent worrying about how much time they were getting to spend with Mom and Dad while he was stuck in algebra.

All good, right?

Wrong.

It started to eat at him that Tails was getting to start school younger, especially when he didn't even seem to *need* it. The elementary school coursework that Sonic had had to glean clandestinely was a walk in the park for the fox kit and even the 'gifted program' they put him in didn't seem to be much of a challenge. And the cherry on top was that, despite how bored he *should* have been, he didn't complain. At all! He came home every day absolutely bursting at the seams with excitement that only seemed to build with each passing day.

And what stung even more were the names he'd drop over dinner. There was *Gus* and *Vincent* and *Laura* and a string of other friends that he'd apparently collected over his few short days

there, eyes and smile huge when Maddie and Tom suggested that they host a playdate sooner than later.

Sonic tried to bring up what he and Jeremy had planned (paintball in two weeks for Simon's birthday), but he barely got a word in while Maddie looked up parents' numbers in the directory and Thomas asked what sort of crafts they'd started working on in art class.

"I have friends too," he muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Knuckles to hear, the echidna tilting his head to the side as he washed the dishes from dinner, passing them over to Sonic for drying. "Big whoop. He has friends. So what."

"I was under the impression you did not have friends until recently."

Sonic threw a dish towel at Knuckles' face and stormed off.

Knuckles was another story all together. He didn't have many people in his life besides the Wachowski family and Jeremy (another issue Sonic was trying not to think too hard about, especially when Jeremy started asking for Knuckles' phone number, and Sonic was trying hard to avoid the question each time it came up or act like he never heard), but who he did have, he monopolized almost as much as Tails.

On the Tuesday after Tails started school, a private tutor showed up at the house. He stayed with Knuckles while Maddie and Tom were at work, and Sonic and Tails were at their schools. At first, Sonic had felt a surge of pride (albeit guilt-tinged). He might have been behind in math, but Knuckles was behind in *everything*. That's what happened when you grew up in a warrior tribe and then traipsed around the galaxy hunting for the universe's ultimate power.

But rather than be ashamed, as Sonic had been, Knuckles approached his private lessons with the same vigor he did any other task. It was a quest to be set upon, and right from the start he was deeply invested in what he was learning.

Especially science.

Which was Sonic and Maddie's *thing*.

It had *always* been Sonic's and Maddie's *thing*.

They had a routine. Sonic would come home, work on his assignments, and save science for last. And when his mom was helping cook dinner or working on final vet reports, Sonic would show her whatever he was working on, asking for help. He wasn't great at science, but he loved it, and it was *cool* having a mother that had gone through a sort of medical degree. And so when the following Tuesday rolled around and they were given one of their first projects (dissecting worms), Sonic was geared up to take what time he could with his mother.

Which was why he had to bite back a swear when he came into the kitchen and found Knuckles sitting at the island with her, pouring over a worksheet on photosynthesis.

“But the plant has no mouth.”

“I know, sweetie.”

“And yet it *eats*.”

“Sort of.”

“And it eats… the *sun*.”

“Not exactly.”

“*How* exactly, then?”

Maddie seemed to be wrestling with how best to answer, and Sonic pounced on the lull. “Hey Mom?”

“Hmm?” she turned to face him.

“So this week we’ve got to-”

“Why does the plant not simply eat the lesser life forms in its environment?” Knuckles demanded. “On Fungilicus 3 there are *many* forms of plant life that hunt.”

Maddie took a deep breath and held up a finger. “One second, hon. Sonic, I’m a little in the middle of something right now.”

“But-”

“Why don’t you go and find Tails?” she suggested, smiling as if she hadn’t just verbally slapped him across the face. “I bet he’d *love* to help.”

His eyes stung and he dashed from the room before she could see.

He was more grateful than he’d ever imagined when the baseball season officially kicked off. Finally, something that was his and *his alone*. Tails was too young, Knuckles was too old. They couldn’t play. They just had to watch him be awesome.

And, to their credit, Knuckles and Tails acted like they were *excited* to do just that. They wore the green and gold t-shirts Mom bought them, and dueled with matching foam fingers in the van on the ride to the field. Knuckles demanded to know who Cracker Jack was and why his name was so funny. Tails bubbled to Sonic about batting averages and how fast Earth kids could pitch. And when they pulled into the parking lot next to a red pickup truck with a specialty license plate reading ‘SHRFFSR’, Sonic couldn’t stop the grin from splitting his face in two.

“They came??” He hurried to unbuckle his seatbelt.

“Course they did,” Tom said, smiling in the rearview mirror. “It’s opening day!”

“Who?” Tails asked. “Who came?”

There was a tapping at Sonic’s window and a woman with the biggest, blondest hair this side of the 70s opened the door. “Where’s mah lil’ All-Star?”

“Miss Rosie!” Sonic sprang into her arms, letting himself be caught in a hug that was equal parts gentle and fierce.

“S’been too long, darlin’!”

“Hi Mom,” Tom said, as he got out of the van.

Knuckles hunched as he stood in the back row. “I thought Mother was Mother.”

“Boys, this is *Tom’s* mother,” Maddie explained as she helped unbuckle Tails.

“Ah.” The echidna nodded, hopped out onto the parking lot, and looked up at the woman who was still giddily hugging the breath out of Sonic. “That must make you the Donut Queen.”

Rosie laughed, loud and musical, as she set Sonic back on his feet. “You were right, Madeline, this one *is* funny.”

“Where’s Dad?” Tom asked, leaning in to kiss his mother’s cheek.

“Oh, he’s in the bleachers already. Had to make sure we got the ‘good seats’,” she answered.

“There is a Donut King?” Knuckles asked.

“Yeah,” Sonic said, smile still firmly in place. “But we just call him ‘Big T’.”

“Exactly *how* big?” Knuckles wanted to know, but he got his answer as the group made their way over to the bleachers where the gray-haired man was waving them over. “Ah. He is average-human-” The elder Wachowski stood to greet them and Knuckles corrected. “- *above* -average-human-size.”

Tom Sr. chuckled, low and rumbling. “And you must be Knuckles.”

The echidna extended a hand. “An honor to meet you, Chief Wachowski.” At the raised eyebrow, he said, “You are the patriarch of the clan, aren’t you?”

The older man laughed again, shaking the boy’s big hand. “S’pose so, son. Right now, though, I’m just enjoyin’ bein’ a granddad.” He shook Tom’s hand next, and then kneeled down, pulling Sonic in for a tight, one-armed hug. “And who’s that hiding behind Maddie?”

On Maddie’s hip, Tails squeaked, “M-Miles, sir.”

Beside them, Rosie reached up and pinched his fluffy cheek. “Cutie-Pie is who he is.”

The kit’s muzzle flushed bright pink. “D’aww…”

Big T smiled, then turned his attention back to Sonic. “So how ‘bout it, kiddo - you ready to bring it home for us tonight?”

“You know it!” the hedgehog beamed.

From the dug-out, the coach called out, “Wachowski! Warm-ups are starting, come on!”

“Duty calls!” He flashed them all another grin. “See you guys at the 7th Inning Stretch!”

A chorus of encouragement followed him to the dug-out.

“Go get ‘em!”

“Vanquish your enemies!”

“You got this, baby!”

“Go Sonic!”

And he did go. The spring in his step carried him through to a triple his first time up at bat, and an assist when he was in the outfield. He was riding high on the adrenaline through nearly five innings.

Until Coach put him on first, and he found himself with his family right in his line of sight. Which wouldn’t have been a problem, if they’d been paying *any attention to the game*.

But they weren’t.

They were much too occupied with *each other*.

Tails had found his way into Rosie’s lap, her bright pink acrylic nails combing through his tails while Maddie tried to wipe mustard from his muzzle.

Knuckles sat between Tom and Big T, the three of them laughing at *something* he couldn’t hear.

And if that wasn’t bad enough.

Knuckles.

Was wearing.

Big T’s *hat*.

Looking like a complete dork and absolutely oblivious to the fact.

He scowled.

A ball whizzed past him.

“Wachowski!!” Coach hollered. “Get yer head in the game, kid!”

Swearing under his breath he dashed after the ball, but the batter was already on base. He threw it back to the pitcher a little harder than he should have.

A whistle blew when he sped back to his spot, the umpire pointing his way. “Keep your speed in check or you’re *benched!”*

“What’s up with you, Sonic!?” Jeremy called from second where he was eyeing the opponent smugly standing on first. “We’re already tied!”

“No worries, bud!” He heard Tom call from the bleachers. “You’ll get the next one.”

His muzzle burned. Of *course* Dad looked up just in time to witness *that*. He pulled his cap a little lower over his eyes and pretended he hadn’t heard.

They won by two, but Sonic could barely bring himself to gloat during the required ‘good game’ high-fives with the other team. Between each fifteen-year-old in a Spring Yard jersey he kept catching glimpses of the rest of his family packing up on the bleachers.

Tails riding on Tom’s shoulders.

Knuckles begrudgingly returning Big T’s hat.

Rosie pinching both of their cheeks.

Maddie and Tom all laughs and smiles.

They were all waiting for him after he’d traded his cleats for his Pumas, standing at the fenceline, looking like an intergalactic Hallmark Card.

“Nice work, bud!” Tom said, one hand outstretched to take his duffle bag, the other holding Tails steady. “Way to hustle out there!”

“Was alright,” he mumbled, handing over the bag.

“Alright!? You were *amazing!* ” Tails insisted.

‘Suck-up,’ Sonic thought bitterly.

“A triumphant warrior, yet humble.” Knuckles clapped him on the shoulder, nearly knocking him off balance. “Surely a victory such as this should be celebrated with the iced cream, yes?”

“Ice cream! Ice cream!” Tails cheered.

Sonic tried to force a smile, but couldn’t manage it. “Uh…”

“Baby, you okay?” Maddie stepped up, put the back of her hand against his cheek, his forehead.

He eased away from her hand. “Just kinda tired, that’s all.”

“It’s late anyway,” Tom said, then turned to his parents. “And you guys have a longer drive than we do.”

“And senior-citizen bedtimes,” Rosie added with a laugh. “There’ll be other times for ice cream.” She reached up and booped the fox’s nose. “It was so nice to finally meet y’all.”

“You too, Grandma Rosie,” Tails said, gaze full of adoration.

Sonic felt like maybe he *was* getting sick.

Tom Sr. crouched down so they were eye-to-eye. “You did good out there tonight, kiddo.”

Sonic shrugged.

“You should take a run out to the ranch sometime soon. I know Biscuit’s been missing you,” the older man continued, referring to the gelding Sonic had learned to ride the summer past. “Not to mention the dogs.”

The hedgehog’s churning stomach quelled just enough for him to try a smile. “Really?”

“Absolutely.” The dark eyes crinkled at the edges. “S’been a while since we’ve had you all to ourselves. What do you say?”

“I say…” Sonic said slowly, as the knot loosened in his chest. “...that sounds great-” He swallowed and then added, “Grandpa T…?"

The man’s gray mustache twitched upwards and he reached out a hand, catching the boy by the back of the neck and pulling him in for a hug. “S’always good seein’ you, kid.”

“You too.” He breathed in mountain air and leather and let it settle his stomach. He felt better when they finally separated. Better yet when the original Mrs. Wachowski pushed her husband playfully aside - *my turn, old man!*- and gathered him up in an embrace that smelled like roses and fresh bread. He took the full feeling in his chest and held it tight, all the way home and up to bed.

If he could just keep holding onto it, maybe he’d be okay.

He should be okay.

He *had* to be okay.

He didn’t know what to do if he wasn’t okay.

He tried to stay okay.

He really did try.

He managed it on Monday.

On Tuesday, Knuckles took Mom's homework time again and he was less okay.

On Wednesday, Tom had to drive Tails to a playdate after school and he had to wait in the car while Tom made small talk with whoever's mom and he was even less okay.

On Thursday, Sonic went to grab his water bottle for baseball practice and saw one of Tails' assignments hanging by the magnet that he and Tom had gotten at a gift shop after a camping trip to Walla Walla.

"What's this doing here?" He jammed his finger against it, turning to Maddie who was throwing an extra jersey into his bag.

She looked up. "That's Tails' last math test."

His teeth clenched. "I know," he said through them, trying and failing to unhinge his jaw. "But what's it doing *here*?"

She rustled through the pantry. "Do you want blue gatorade or red?"

"*Mom*!"

"I don't know what to tell you, Sonic. He got 101. He was proud of it."

"You didn't put *my* last test on the fridge."

She appeared again, snapping the pantry door shut behind her. "You've got baseball trophies all over the house."

"But-"

"You're going to be late for practice if you keep this up."

It was like she was speaking another language, and all Sonic could hear was *we wanted to celebrate our new, smarter son.*

His eyes stung again and he squeezed them shut, turning around so she couldn't see, kneeling down to tie his cleats. Probably for the best, as Maddie took that moment to say, "Jeremy's mom texted. Do you want her to pick you up, or do you want to run?"

He untied his cleats, just so he could stay turned around, tying them again. Just so she wouldn't hear the way his voice quivered, building with an awful, stinging rage. "I thought you were taking me!"

"I know, hon, but something came up. Knuckles' tutor asked for a meeting and I can't reschedule again."

He tied his cleats tight enough that his feet ached, willing his eyes to dry up before anything could fall out. "I'll run," he grumbled, making sure to stomp as hard as he could across the

kitchen floor.

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but her phone rang. With a frustrated groan, she answered it, pulling a too wide smile, voice pitching upwards. “Hi John. No, this is a good time! I wanted to talk about looking into some more remedial science for Knuckles. It’s just that he’s struggling-”

“*I* was struggling!” he pointed out, ears pinned flat to his head. “*I* had to figure it all out on my own in a *cave!* Why can’t he just-”

“*Sonic, stop it, I’m on the phone!* Sorry about that, John. Like I said, I think it would be best…”

She walked out of the room, forgetting to say goodbye.

Sonic made sure to slam the back door on his way out.

He dreamt about caves.

The night after practice, Sonic woke up with a choked shout and nearly fell off the top bunk trying to remember where he was. His bare paws had scratched against his spring duvet, the moon from the skylight casting pale crosshatching along the floor. Below him, he could hear Tails breathing. Below that; Tom’s snoring that he vehemently denied.

His heart was still pounding, and he practiced Maddie’s yoga breathing, paws on his chest.

Calling them dreams was a little unfair. Memories were more apt. This had been a particularly nasty one from a few winters ago. He’d been ten years old and one of the worst storms Green Hills had ever seen came through the mountains, cutting off the roads and electricity. His cave walls had frozen over, and his food stores were low, and he ended up burning up until even his legs couldn’t move.

He vaguely remembered pulling himself out of the cave, somehow ending up at the Wachowski’s house. Maddie left the garage open during bad storms for animals to escape the cold, and he’d curled up behind a wheelbarrow on an old picnic blanket, stealing whatever he could from their garbage bins.

It was one of those moments that stuck tight in his side like a thorn and made his stomach drop whenever he thought about it, even now as he looked up at the attic ceiling. How alone he’d been. How absolutely dependent on himself to the point of withering away.

“I’m not alone,” he whispered. “I’m not alone, I’m not alone, I’m not alone.”

Below him, Tails turned over in his sleep, mumbling something to himself.

“I’m not,” he whispered, quieter.

Tom snored again. He could hear Maddie padding across the floor, probably to make herself a cup of tea. She was always the worst sleeper.

Sonic was tempted to go find her. Maybe even show up at their door and ask, please, if he could sleep between them, even though he was totally, definitely, absolutely too old for that. Just like he was too old to get picked up, and too old to get driven to school, and too old to care that his math homework wasn't on the fridge or that he couldn't talk about worms with his mother at the kitchen table.

"I'm not alone," he said again.

The silence around him seemed to leer around him. *Are you sure?*

He hiked the covers over his head and tried to go back to sleep, but ended up awake until the sun peeked through the skylight and Maddie was calling up the attic steps that it was time to start another horrible day.

The World's Most Okayest Parents Give it Their Best Shot

Chapter Summary

In which Tom and Maddie see things spinning out of control, and make a plan to get things back on track.

Chapter Notes

Invader_Sam here, just wanting to say thank you ALL for all your wonderful comments! I'm so sorry we can't respond to all of them, but there's just not enough time in the day! ^_^" But we read them all and are so, so grateful for all your kind words, your keyboard smashes, and your predictions as to where the story is going! It makes our day!!

If Sonic thought he was keeping things under control, keeping up a good act, he grossly underestimated how well his parents knew him. How much they already knew he was struggling. He also didn't know how helpless they felt about it.

"Everytime I think things are getting better…" Maddie sighed. She was sitting up in bed, a book tented across her knee. "I don't think he said more than two words to me today."

"Two? That's lucky." Tom scrubbed shower water out of his hair before hanging the towel up and joining his wife in their room. He sat down next to her, their backs against the headboard, and listened to the quiet upstairs. "He wouldn't ride to school with me."

"Or practice." She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. "And it's *my* fault. I bailed on him for a phone conference with Knuckles tutor-"

"That couldn't be helped."

"I *know* that, but still- He's mad at me about it. I *swear* I heard him call me *Maddie* yesterday. I know he's falling through the cracks but between the tutors and the new school for Tails-"

"I know…"

"And arranging triple the events and-"

He grabbed one of her hands, pulling it away from her eyes. "Maddie, I get it. I'm right there with you."

“I just…” She let out a long, quivering breath. “I feel a little like we’re drowning here, Tom. I really, really do. And I don’t want any of them to suffer for it.”

“Seems like that ship has sailed.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, listening to the sounds of their house settling.

“I think…” Maddie said, after the clock had ticked past a few long minutes, “I think we might want to consider a real family meeting with Sonic.”

Tom hummed. “That or a therapist.”

“That’s not a bad idea either.” She linked their fingers, holding tight. “There’s so much he hasn’t told us. This has been a lot for us, but I can’t even imagine what it’s doing to him. Maybe- maybe it was too soon to just dump the whole *brother* thing on him.”

“Not like we were working with a flexible timeline.”

“Or any other options besides leaving minors on the streets.”

Tom scrubbed at his face with his free hand. “The universe keeps dumping kids in our laps. And as much as I love ‘em…”

“We’re just two people who never planned on kids,” she finished for him, watching the guilt flash across his face. “And now we’ve got three wonderful, smart, kind boys. And I love them more than anything. But we’re outnumbered now.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Tom nodded slowly, mulling it all over. The guilt was heavy, but Maddie was right. She was most of the time. He loved his new kids, but their adjustment period was drawn out over time that Sonic hadn’t needed. Their first child hadn’t asked them to explain the television or baseball or how simple things in their house worked. He’d spent a lifetime peeking through school windows and fending for himself within their human realm, and it couldn’t have been at all easy to watch these two new additions receive what he never could. “Well, it couldn’t hurt to talk to the school counselor. Put feelers out. Maybe they’ll have a recommendation for someone we can book outside of school. And we’ll figure out a time next week to talk with him about all of this. Make sure he *knows* how much we love him and how we’re feeling, too.”

“I think that’s a great plan.”

“Maybe after his game this weekend?”

She nodded. “I’m sure your parents wouldn’t mind watching the other two here.”

“You kidding? Pretty sure my mom’s already got two new sweaters half knitted.”

So it was decided. They’d take him to his favorite diner near the baseball field. Treat him to a night out with just the three of them. Maybe even arrange for a counselor to help lift one of the many burdens Sonic had always been hesitant to share.

“Anything to help our kid,” Tom said as he turned off the bedside lamp, finally settling down for the night, Maddie not far behind.

Sonic noticed the difference as soon as he was downstairs when Maddie set his lunchbox down at his elbow during breakfast. “Packed your favorite,” she said, dipping down to kiss him between the ears. He was too stunned to duck away like he’d been doing the last few times, and peeked through the opened zipper to see a Lunchables looking back at him.

Tom was down the stairs second, already in uniform. He said good morning to Tails and Knuckles, scratched at Ozzie’s head, and kissed Maddie (ignoring the chorus of *ews* from the island) before sitting himself down next to Sonic.

“Hey, bud. You up for a ride-along after school?”

Sonic picked at the plate of scrambled eggs Maddie set down in front of him. “You work until five.”

“Not if I take off early.”

Sonic frowned, chansing a glance up at his dad. “Why?”

“Because you told me last week that you needed new cleats. Figured we could hit the store before your game this weekend.”

“You heard me?”

“Course I heard you! Have it on my list and everything.” He tweaked Sonic’s nose. “So. Up for some shopping after school?”

Despite the rocky week, Sonic left the house tentatively optimistic. That optimism only bloomed when, true to his word, Tom was waiting outside the school building at 3:01, playing Queen's Greatest Hits from the sheriff's cruiser. It was rare to see the car at school. Usually, Tom or Maddie went around in the loser cruiser, and sometimes (very rarely) they’d show up in the truck.

The police car garnered enough attention that a small gaggle of Sonic’s friends ended up surrounding them, ogling all of the buttons and sirens.

“You’re so *lucky*,” Jeremy announced, watching glumly as Sonic climbed into the front seat. “Do you ever get to hit the buttons?”

Sonic was about to say *no* (they were off limits, because Tom had always been a stickler about his police car), but Tom took his moment of silence to lean across the passenger seat and say, “You kidding? He’s a pro at button pushing. Here. Show’m how the sirens work.”

“You serious!?”

“If you don’t push it, I’ll let one of your friends do it instead.”

The blare of police sirens was met with cheers from the group of teens, and Sonic waved at them from the window as they pulled away from the pickup line.

It was a great afternoon.

Sonic chose a new pair of cleats, since his were beginning to wear down, though it took longer than expected. Apparently they and every other sports parent had the same plan that day, and Tom ended up calling Maddie from the back of the store to let her know that they wouldn't be home for dinner.

"Good plan," she said. "Probably for the best."

"What happened?"

She groaned through the static on the other line. "Knuckles started learning about gravity today, and Tails is having a fit."

From just behind her, Tom could vaguely hear a young voice shouting something before Knuckles' clear baritone boomed back, *Gravity is no match for me! I am stronger than anything on this Earth! The Texted Book lies!*

"Tails, honey, you're not gonna win this one."

"But he's trying to *beat up gravity!"*

"Wrong! I will beat up this Newton man for ever inventing it!"

"No one *invented gravity!*"

"Tell that to Newton!"

"He's *dead!"*

"No excuses!"

Tom rolled his eyes, leaning against a rack of discount sneakers to watch Sonic compare two different colored cleats. "Sounds like a fun time over there."

"You wouldn't even belie- *Knuckles put the vase down!"*

She had her hands full, so Tom hung up and joined Sonic. They finally went with the red cleats. Tom let Sonic pass over his credit card before suggesting that they go out to dinner, just the two of them, and his partner in crime spent the entire ride to the pizzeria unloading two weeks worth of school gossip.

It was good to hear him talking again. Tom only wished Maddie had been there, too.

There were grease stains and talks about the boys at school and how he was doing better at math. Tom asked every question he could and realized after about the third just how much

he'd missed. It was melancholy; two weeks felt like nothing between all of the errands they'd had to run and tutors they'd needed to check in with, but it was a lifetime for a fourteen year old.

"Why didn't you tell us," Tom asked when Sonic finally admitted to getting a 96 on a math test.

Sonic balled up a napkin between his bare paws, gloves set aside to save them from too many pizza stains. "I *did*," he explained. "But you were busy."

"Yeah. I know, bud. But hey, let's make sure Mom sees when we get back. That seems like a pretty fridge-worthy grade."

He texted Maddie while Sonic threw away their plates.

Lots to catch up on when we're back.

They pulled into the driveway long after Tails had gone to sleep, and Knuckles (still nursing the mental wounds of not being stronger than the force of nature) had gone down to his basement room to train, even though Maddie had explained that no number of squats would put him in the same league as gravity.

"My boys have returned!" Maddie was loading the dishwasher when Sonic and Tom walked in, and kneeled down to pull her son into a hug. "Mmm. You smell like pizza."

"Two slices of pepperoni!"

"I'm jealous." She wiped a missed bit of sauce off his cheek, exchanging it for a kiss.

Tom put down his keys, leaning against the counter. "Sonic's also got a grade we didn't hear about."

"He does?"

"96 on a *math* test."

They made a big deal of putting it onto the fridge once Sonic had rifled through his backpack to find the paper. Tom took a picture and sent it to his parents, who called almost immediately afterwards, still not adept to the modern world of *texting*.

"Where's my genius grandson?"

Sonic practically snatched the phone out of Tom's hand. "Hi, Grandpa T!"

"There he is! I told Tommy you were a real math star. Just gotta hit your stride."

"You think?"

"Oh, definitely! I was like that when I was your age, you know-"

“Don’t listen to a thing this man says, sugar!”

“Gramma Rosie!”

“Hi baby!”

“Don’t slander me in front of my grandson!”

“Oh *please* Sonic, your grandpa couldn’t tell a seven from an eight. Still can’t. It’s why we can never trust him to tip at restaurants. Good to see some of the Wachowski men got a brain between their ears.”

Tom looked up from where he was boiling water. “*Hey!”*

Sonic laughed, taking the phone with him to the couch where he bunked for the next fifteen minutes, huddled underneath one of the throw blankets while he talked to his grandparents.

“This is nice,” said Maddie, the words heavier than they were meant to be, peeking around the corner to where Sonic was hanging upside down off the couch, bragging about his batting record. “I almost forgot what our kid was like.”

“I know.” Tom went through the cabinets for two mugs and tea. “I didn’t realize just *how* starved for attention he was.”

“Well, Cheryll did say it would happen.” She walked back to the island, watching her husband work.

“The Oracle spoke the truth.”

From the other room they could hear Sonic bidding his grandparents goodnight, exchanging an excessive number of *I Love You’s* and trading impossible measurements when his grandmother apparently asked him to guess just how much (*“love you more than the universe, sugar” - “that’s impossible, grandma.” - “not for me it ain’t!”*).

They were up next, Sonic speeding through to give Tom back his phone. “Night!”

“Hey hey hey!” Maddie opened her arms. “No hug?”

Tom waited until it was his turn, watching Sonic practically fall against Maddie, and counting back he realized that it was the first time in a few days that they’d even gone through their nighttime routine. He could only feel guilty for so long, because Sonic was at his feet next. Still, he hugged his kid a little tighter than normal. “Night, bud. Love you.”

Sonic was out of the kitchen just before the kettle sang.

Maddie gratefully accepted her mug while Tom poured a massive spoonful of honey into his own. “Would it be too soon to hope that this is him adjusting?”

Tom gave his tea a stir, tasted it, and then added another spoonful. “Something tells me yes.”

She blew out a disappointed breath. “I was thinking the same thing.”

For the most part though, the next few days went as smoothly as they could have. Sonic still avoided Tails and Knuckles as much as possible, even as Tails tailed (ha) behind him, with Pokemon cards or the Nintendo Switch, begging to play.

“Go away,” Sonic would snap, hurrying out of sight before either Tom or Maddie could scold him.

Knuckles, to his credit, took Sonic’s mood in stride. He continued to try and corner his younger brother, offering him training.

“It would be good for you,” he announced over dinner. “Your power is untamed. If you were better able to control it-”

“I control it fine,” Sonic shot back from behind a forkful of broccoli. When Maddie gave him a look, he shrank down and stayed quiet through the rest of the meal.

But when the three boys weren’t all together, Sonic was tentatively happier. But even that felt like an awful game. Like Maddie and Tom were only seeing so far through him, as if he’d put up a thick sheet of fog between himself and his parents. His smiles were a little too forced, his conversations too stilted, and it was like pulling teeth to get anything remotely personal out of their middle child.

They were practically counting the days as the first big away game approached. Tom called ahead to his parents to double and triple check that they’d be available to stay with Tails and Knuckles. They gassed up all their cars to make sure nothing unexpected slowed them down. They packed and repacked his duffel, making sure nothing was missing. Tom went so far as to volunteer to bring the snacks, and Maddie went out that day to buy an emperor's hoard worth of oranges and cheese sticks.

“This is going to be *perfect*,” they kept telling each other. “We’ll get this all smoothed over. We’ll get our kid back to the way he was. This has *got* to go *perfectly*.”

And then, on Friday afternoon, as fate would have it, the phone rang.

An Unwatched Hedgehog Boils Over

Chapter Summary

In which things come to a head.

Chapter Notes

Invader_Sam here again! I just wanted to mention there are a couple of swear words used by a couple of overwhelmed parents, just to give you all a head's up.

It began with one child.

A little girl in Tails' class named Dorothy showed up on Tuesday morning with a fever and then was gone by lunchtime.

On Wednesday two other kids left; one during morning announcements, and another during gym, both feeling dizzy and tired.

"I hope they're alright," said his teacher, Ms. Darcy, once they had returned from gym class, taking their seats for social studies.

Thursday, a substitute was in Ms. Darcy's place, letting them know that she was a little under the weather but would be back as soon as possible. Not long after they had started reading that day's chapter of Winn Dixie, little Ryan from the back of the class ran to the front and threw up in a garbage can.

He was sent home by a very traumatized young substitute who was definitely not paid enough for things like that.

He told Maddie in passing on the way back home. "Everyone's getting sick in my class!"

"Yeah, Sonic's school had a few kids out too. There's something nasty going around."

"Makes me glad I'm an alien!"

"Why's that, honey?"

"The probability of catching one of your Earth infections is unlikely."

She hummed, looking into the backseat from the rearview mirror. “I’m not so sure about that. It’s why we got you vaccinated when you first got here. With your immune systems, you’re probably *more* susceptible.”

“I doubt it! My planet is known for its *great* healing properties.”

“You’re on a new planet now, sweetheart. Besides, when Sonic first came to live with us, he caught something horrible. Probably from spending more time around humans.”

“But I’ve spent time around *you*,” Tails pointed out reasonably. “And I’m still *fine*!”

“I sure hope so. But just in case, *please* make sure to keep using that hand sanitizer I gave you. The last thing we need is a group of sick kids in our house.”

“Trust me,” he said, leaning on the door to look out the window. “I bet I’ll be the only kid to not get sick.”

Irony must have been keeping one ear to the ground.

He’d looked fine Friday morning. A little tired, and a little quiet, but good enough to usher out the door to Tom’s car for school.

They barely noticed him around Sonic zipping back and forth around their legs, nearly tripping them as they walked out the door. “Remember! We’re leaving today at *four*.”

“I remember,” Maddie promised. “And your grandparents are going to get here a little earlier to say good luck.”

“Mother,” Knuckles said, tugging on the hem of her scrubs. “Will you record any particularly impressive feats of athleticism on the tiny pocket computer?”

“You bet.”

Sonic paused his zipping at Maddie’s side. “You want her to tape the game?”

“Of course,” the echidna said. “I enjoy watching you compete.”

Sonic blinked, and Maddie reached down to massage his ears. “What do you think, baby? Think you can hit a homer for your big brother?”

“Y-yeah. Sure.” He leaned into her touch, eyes still on Knuckles.

“Excellent. I would wish you good luck, but I doubt you will need it. And now, I must do battle with the toaster.”

“The toaster isn’t out to get you, Knux,” Tom said.

“You know nothing of our struggles, Father.”

“C’mon guys, let’s get going.” The sheriff grabbed his keys from the hook. “Tails, let’s pick up the pace.”

“M’comin’...” the fox said softly, his backpack seemingly heavier than usual as he followed Tom and Sonic out the door.

Maddie watched him go, brow furrowed, but couldn’t think about it any longer because Knuckles was beginning his standoff with a kitchen appliance.

Maddie had every intention of using a half day at the clinic, going so far as to offset some of her clients onto the other perfectly wonderful veterinarians on staff (who had been more than supportive to see her take time to watch her son’s game). She did not, however, expect all of their weeks of planning to come crashing down at the hands of Linda the Vet Tech, who was on the phone when Maddie hurried in.

“-oh! Here she is!”

She paused at the desk. “Here I am?”

“Sorry, Doctor Wachowski? Someone’s on the phone for you.”

“If it’s another client, tell them I’m off at 2 for a family thing. If they want to book next week-”

“It’s someone named Mr. Hunter? Says he’s your son’s nurse.”

She went through a quick tally of her three kids. Knuckles had her or his tutor if there was an emergency, Sonic’s nurse was a Ms. Janice. Which meant-

Oh. Please. *Not today.*

“Hey, Mr. Hunter,” she took the phone, crossing the fingers of her other hand. “Is everything okay?”

“Hi, Mrs. Wachowski. No, ‘fraid Tails came to school feeling a little under the weather today.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and blew out a long breath. “How much under the weather?”

“Pretty far. He caught that nasty bug going around school. He’s got 101 right now, so he’s here with me and- hm?” There was movement on the other end, and she heard Nurse Hunter say something to someone on the side. Then a new voice came through.

“*Mommy…”*

Oh *jeez*.

“Tails, honey? What’s going on?”

She could hear him sniffle, and wasn't sure if that was congestion or crying or both. "I don't feel good," he said, voice awash in warbles. "I wanna come home, please?"

She let her head drop a moment to the top of the desk. Heart aching ten ways from Sunday, she said, "Of course you can come home, baby. I'll be right there to get you."

"Thank you."

It was the 'thank you' that killed her.

She felt Linda pat her arm.

She lifted her head again, found the woman smiling in sympathy. "Go on, honey. I'll rearrange your appointments."

She was in the car, buckling her seatbelt when her cellphone pinged again. Cringing, she picked it up.

JASON [9:37 AM - talk to text]: So uh Knuckles just uh was sick to his stomach here

Her forehead hit the steering wheel. "Fuck."

She called Jason on the way to Tails' school, hoping above all hopes that maybe it was just an exaggeration from a squeamish young tutor.

"Are you *sure* he's sick? Allergies are bad this time of year."

"Pretty sure," said Jason. "I'll stay with him until you get here, but he's in pretty bad shape."

"DO NOT WORRY, MOTHER," she heard Knuckles cry from the background. "I WILL VANQUISH THESE PARASITES!"

Jason yelped and then shouted; "Back to the bathroom, Knuckles! I am *not* cleaning up another accident on the carpet." There were the sounds of running and then a muffled scream of *my body is rebelling against its master!* followed by a whole lot of heaving that told Maddie her eldest was absolutely not vanquishing any sort of parasite on his own.

"Thanks for watching him, Jason. I appreciate it."

"You'll be home soon though, right?"

"Yeah. I just have to pick up my youngest one. This thing's going around. If you call Tom though he might be able to get there before-"

The tutor hung up before she could finish, no doubt off to call her husband.

Tails was waiting for her in the nurse's office, looking even more pitiful than he'd sounded on the phone. He lifted his arms when she came closer, and when Maddie bent down to pick him

up he went boneless, head falling to her shoulder.

“Not feeling too good, are you honey?”

His reply was little more than a whine. The poor kid was burning up, practically a furnace in her arms, and she carried him out to the car after signing him out in the main office.

Tom called once they were back on the road, Tails curled up in his booster seat, holding his tails to his chest for some kind of comfort.

“Mads, you’ll never guess who I just got off the phone with-”

“I bet you I can.”

“Ah. Jason called you first, then?”

She could hear him getting into his own car, fumbling with the keys. “Poor guy had to clean vomit up off the carpet.”

“Should I, like, tip him when I get there?” Tom asked, the sound of his engine rumbling to life in the background.

“If we want him to come back and keep tutoring, yeah. I would.”

“What’s the going rate for puke cleanup?”

“Don’t ask me, babe.”

She heard a shuffling as he switched to his headphones. “I’ll call my mom and warn them off once I get home.” A pause and then, “One of us can still go to the game tonight, right?”

“Tom.”

“I mean, you could stay with- or-or-or *me*. *I* could stay home.”

“It always takes all-hands-on-deck when Sonic gets sick.”

“Yeah, but we’re pros at it now, right? And it’s only one kid!”

Behind her, Tails made a noise and she scrambled for the tiny wastebasket they kept in the car, getting it into the boy’s trembling hands with just seconds to spare. “It’s both of them, Tom.”

“*Both??* ”

“Got the puke in the wastebasket to prove it too.”

“Oh my god…”

“Yeah.”

“What’re we gonna tell him?”

“The truth.”

“And how do you think *that’s* gonna go over?”

“Trying not to think about it right- Tails, you gotta hold onto it, I have to drive, I’m sorry, baby. I’ll open the windows.”

“*M’sorry, mommy!”*

“Baby, it’s okay. Tom, I can’t-”

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll let you go.”

“Yeah.”

“See you soon.”

“Yeah.” Maddie hung up the phone and focused on the road.

Tom’s truck was already in the driveway when she and Tails got home, jogging down the steps to open the side door while she grabbed the rest of her things.

“Sorry, Daddy,” Tails sniffled when he saw Tom.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Tom unbuckled the kit, lifting him up. “Not feeling too good, bud?”

Tails shook his head against Tom’s shoulder.

Knuckles was on the kitchen floor when they got back inside, staring at the ceiling, the garbage can beside him.

“Hey there, honey.” Maddie stepped over him to grab gatorades out of the fridge.

“Mother,” he wheezed. “I am dying.”

“You’re not dying, Knuckles.”

“I have written my last requests upon that paper towel,” he declared, weakly lifting his arm to point.

She squinted down at the messy crayon scrawl. “This just says *grapes*.”

“Throw them down upon my pyre when I go!” He paused. “But not the *green* ones.”

“Sure, honey. Now c’mon. Let’s get you to the couch.”

It was a struggle getting the two boys situated, but soon enough they were bundled on the couch sporting matching fevers and throw blankets. She and Tom went back and forth, calling work and grandparents, helping sick kids to the bathroom when they couldn't quite make the few feet on their own.

So preoccupied in the chaos, that they almost completely forgot about their plans for the night until the back door was slamming and Ozzie was trotting happily to the back door. "Mom, Dad! You'll never believe what happened today-"

"Shit," Maddie heard Tom curse under his breath from where she'd been going through the first aid kid in the bathroom, realizing how woefully low they were on aspirin. Her husband had been searching for his keys, getting ready to run out to the pharmacy, but now stood beside her looking absolutely every bit as terrible as she felt.

They heard the *thump* of his backpack on the floor and his footsteps in time with the dog's as he trotted in, halfway through an anecdote they didn't hear when he slowed in the hall between the kitchen and the living room. "Why's it smell like Lysol in-"

Neither human got a chance to respond before Knuckles answered the question by being violently ill in the bucket they'd put next to the couch for him.

"No," the hedgehog said quietly.

"Sonic-" Maddie started.

"No. No. *Hell* no!"

"Sonic!" Tom exclaimed.

"Are you friggin' *kidding* me?"

Tom jabbed the hand that held his keys in the boy's direction. "You watch that language."

But the hedgehog rounded on them, green eyes flashing blue. "How long have they been like this?"

"What?" Maddie blinked. "Since this morning-"

"You've been just- just- *sitting* on this? All day?!" He started to pace. "Nobody thought to text, give a guy a little warning that he's about to walk into a hazmat zone? " His eyes widened, and he paused in his pacing to stare up at them. "And- and you've been near them all day! How- how are you supposed to get to the game if you're *sick!?"*

Maddie opened her mouth and closed it again, looking over at Tom.

They didn't have to say anything.

Sonic's jaw ticked. They watched him put the pieces together quick enough, and the clarity could have broken glass. "Oh. Of *course*. You're *not* coming."

“Sonic-” Tom began, stepping forward, but Sonic only stepped back, fists at his sides.

“You’re *not* coming.”

“I really wish we could, sweetheart-”

“*Please!* You were just looking for the perfect excuse to skip out!”

“Now hang on, that’s not fair-” Maddie began.

He cut her off. “Fair? *Fair!?”* The quills along his back crackled with static. “Lemme tell you what’s not *fair.* It’s not *fair* that I don’t get any help with homework anymore! And it’s not *fair* that I- that I get in trouble because I don’t *want* to share my-my room and my friends and my- my favorite comics, and my *parents!”*

“Sonic!” Tom shoved his keys into his pocket, kneeling down. “Sonic, we *know* that this is an adjustment! We *get* that-”

“You don’t get anything!”

Tom scrubbed his hands through his hair, tugging at the roots. “It’s not exactly easy for us either! We *know* that this is a lot-”

“*You* think it’s a lot!?” Sonic’s quills sparked again, nearly catching against the corner of the living room rug. “Try- try watching two people take over your whole life! But you don’t care about any of that! You’re too busy with your two, perfect sons to ask the screwup how *he’s* feeling!

“Sonic, honey, you need to calm down! You’re gonna *burn* something!”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, because he sparked even more, and when he turned his glare towards Maddie it was flooded with tears. “All I *do* is screw up!”

“That’s not what I meant-”

“I had to figure it all out on my *own*, and now I’m just- just some dumb kid who never got *tutors* or- or parents to help *me* when I was sick, or my math tests on the fridge! Because I’m just- just some stupid *stray* you guys got to pick up off the streets!”

“Sonic, *stop!”*

“Mommy?”

The sparks paused for a moment when Tails wobbled up behind them, wrapped in a throw blanket. “Is Sonic okay?”

Before Maddie could usher him away, Sonic was speeding forward. With a flash of wind and electricity, Tails was pushed down onto his back, Sonic standing over him. “This is *all your fault*,” he snarled down at the terrified kit. “If you’d just stayed on your planet-”

“Brother!” Knuckles rushed forward, knees barely holding him, and stood between Sonic and Tails. “This is *not* how a warrior behaves. Stand down.”

“Oh of course! The brave hero!”

“Do not take your anger out on me. I am at no fault for your misgivings!”

“Oh really? Last I checked, you destroyed *my* house, and now you’re living here like nothing happened!”

“I apologized and made amends!”

“I didn't destroy anything, but I never got the ice cream or grandparents! If you’d just- just *minded your own business* -”

“But Sonic,” Tails peeped from behind Knuckles.

Sonic snarled, stepping forward, but Knuckles stopped him with a firm hand to his shoulder. The blue hedgehog was still able to glare down at Tails from behind Knuckles. “I wish you’d *never come here* ,” he snarled down at the eight year old. “I wish you and your stupid inventions would just *go away!”*

Tails opened his mouth, closed it again, and then burst into tears.

“Sonic!” That was enough to get Tom moving again. “What’s the matter with you!”

“We know you’re upset,” Maddie was on the move too, swooping in to scoop and bawling Tails up into her arms. “But that’s no excuse to treat your brothers like this.”

“They’re not my brothers!” Sonic pointed a shaking finger at them. “You saying it over and over doesn’t make it so they are! They’re just- just *aliens* who showed up and ruined my life!”

“That’s *enough!*” Tom was shouting now. “You’re out of line!”

“Sonic!” Maddie was getting just as angry, Tails still crying against her side. “You need to *calm down*.”

“I don’t *want* to calm down! I hate them! I hate *you*!” He looked ready to yell at Tails again, glare fixed firmly on the kit, before Tom stepped between the two.

“Go to your room!”

“But-!”

“You can’t be here when you’re acting like *this*,” Tom barked, pointing towards the stairs. “Room. *Now*.”

“I don’t have a room anymore!!” Sonic shouted right back. “They took it!”

Knuckles reached out again, but Sonic smacked his hand away with a flash of sparks. The echidna fell back against Maddie's legs, nearly toppling all of them.

"Sonic, *stop*," Maddie said, struggling to hold up both boys, and her voice shook. "You need to go upstairs and take a *breath!* Just- just *go-"*

He looked up, saw her wet eyes and his own pooled. "You want me to *go? Fine*. I'll go. I'll go where I should have gone *years* ago." He spun, walked purposefully to the mantle, and pulled down the little leather satchel that held the portal rings.

"Sonic." Tom took a step forward.

"Forget it, Tom. You can keep on living your *perfect* lives with your *perfect* kids."

"Sonic, get back here. We're not done-"

"We *are* done."

"*Sonic!"*

When he spun around again, tears were hanging off his chin. "It was good being your practice kid while it lasted," he snapped, but his voice was tight and quivering at the edges, shoulders quaking. "I wish I'd never found your stupid garage. I wish you'd never found *me* ."

Before Tom could reach out and grab him, the hedgehog was gone, the back door slamming behind him.

Home is Where the Rings Lead

Chapter Summary

In which a boy runs, but finds he can't get very far.

He was having a breakdown.

That’s what Tom and Maddie kept telling one another as they ushered Tails and Knuckles back to the couch. Tails was still wailing, covering his face in the dampening throw blanket.

“Where’d Sonic go!”

“He’s going out to get some air,” Maddie told him gently. “He’s just angry, that’s all.”

“I didn’t mean to make him mad!”

“No, sweetheart, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“And he shouldn’t have said any of that stuff,” Tom added, voice gruff with worry.

“No,” Maddie agreed, “he definitely shouldn’t have. And we’ll be having a long talk with him when he’s back.”

In the lull of Tails and Knuckles running to the bathroom, Tom and Maddie were able to run upstairs and change into something that wasn’t their work clothes.

“God, Tom…”

“I know.”

She sat on the bed, already in one of her husband's loose t-shirts and leggings. Tom was rifling through the drawer in his boxers.

“*Practice kid*.”

His hands paused and he sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “I heard it, too.”

She let her head fall against her hands, massaging fruitlessly at her temples. “I know I should be angry, I *am* angry, but I just-”

Tom finally found a shirt, tugging it over his head. When his face was back in sight, she could see how red his eyes were. “God. I *hate* this.”

She reached for him, and he sat beside her, head on her shoulder.

“We did everything wrong, didn’t we,” he muttered.

Maddie ran her hands through his hair. “No. We didn’t. We just have a very scared and traumatized kid.”

“I don’t think we can do this alone.”

“No one said we had to, Tom. I mean, the brooding loner thing isn’t a good look anyway. You know how I feel about Batman.”

That at least got a little laugh out of him. It faded moments later, the room settling into an uneasy silence.

“We’ll talk to him when he’s back.” Maddie turned her face, kissing the top of Tom’s head. “It won’t be like we planned, but it has to happen.”

“Yeah. I know. We’ve just been so busy learning how to do this, and he got caught up in the jumble.”

“It’s more than that, Tom. You *know* it’s more than that.”

He sighed, and she felt the warm breath skirt past her neck. “Yeah. I know.”

“So we’ll talk to him when he’s back.”

But he didn’t come back.

Not by the time they tucked the other two into bed on the couch.

Not by the time they took Ozzie for his last walk of the night.

At midnight, Tom climbed the attic stairs, hoping against hope that the boy had snuck back in when they were busy, but found nothing but an unmade bed and moonlight in the attic room.

All it took was a small head shake to Maddie at the kitchen island and she dissolved into tears.

“He turned off his phone,” she wept, hand over her mouth. “Tom, where did he *go?”*

He drew her in close, rested his chin on top of her head, closing his eyes hard against the stinging. “It’ll be *fine*,” he said, not sure who he was trying to reassure. “He’s gone out before on those superhero stunts. He’s… blowing off steam.”

“He took the *rings*, Tom.” She scrubbed at her face, trying to reign in her breath.

“It’ll be fine,” he said again, not sounding like he believed it.

She grabbed his hand back. “It'll be fine,” she parroted. “He could be back in the morning.”

Neither of them slept, staying up in the living room with two sick children waiting for their first son to come home.

By the time the sun was up, there'd still been no sign of him.

"He could be literally *anywhere*," Maddie said, exhaustion taking its toll on the both of them as they leaned on the kitchen island, staring down at their untouched mugs of coffee. "How are we supposed to find him?"

Tom sucked in a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and then said, "I think we're gonna need some backup."

Maddie took her car for a drive to look and talk to neighbors while Tom stayed and held fort with the two sick children.

"He'll be back, right?" Tails asked weakly, curled up and shivering on the couch. His fever had spiked early in the morning, and the poor child looked absolutely wrecked. Knuckles was doing a little better, but Tom had suspicions that it was a front.

He spent his time between taking care of the two boys and calling Wade.

"Sonic could be out trying to save a city," Wade told him. "You know he does that when he's trying to burn off stress."

Tom did his best to not let too much unease sneak into his voice, and knew he was failing spectacularly. "He left *yesterday*, Wade. He's- he's fifteen. And-" he swallowed, "he took his rings."

Wade went quiet. "Okay," he said, voice uncharacteristically serious. "Let's do this by the book. Protocol."

"Protocol," Tom said, nodding. "Right. Protocol." Protocol he could do. Protocol was what he did for a living. Protocol was how he helped people in the town, and now it was going to help him.

"We'll give it 24 hours," said Wade, and Tom could hear him typing up a report. "What time did he leave?"

"3:45, yesterday."

He hadn't been on the opposite side of this, and suddenly had a new sort of empathy for the mothers and fathers who came to him, looking for lost children who'd let go of their parents' hands in a crowd.

"I'll start making calls, see which of our people we can call in. All hands on deck. I know there are plenty of folks in town who'll want to help, too."

"God, Wade… Just- I mean-"

"S'not anything, Tom. You know we'd do anything for your boys."

He thanked Wade just as Maddie walked back in, looking crestfallen. She'd been crying in the car, and was still crying when he grabbed her into a fierce hug, needing the comfort as much as she did.

"God, Mads. You don't think- with the rings-"

"I don't *want* to think about that," she croaked. "God. I just don't-"

"I told Wade. He's getting a group together."

"Good. That's good."

"And if he's not back by tonight, they'll be out looking with us. For as long as it takes."

Maddie opened her mouth, but closed it again when they both felt someone tap their legs.

"Um- Mommy?" Tails was there, looking just as exhausted and worried as they did, eyes glazed with fever. He lifted up his hand, showing them both a crayon and a piece of paper. "I've got an idea."

"And I will help." Knuckles was leaning on the kitchen doorway, forehead glistening.

Tom looked at them both, then kissed Maddie's hair. "We're gonna find him. We have to."

Sonic didn't stop running.

He started in California, and then up to Alaska, and then all the way across Canada until he hit the coast of New Jersey. He was too afraid to try running across water again, so he wound up in South America, leaving a long trail of blue lightning behind him. He stopped only once or twice to scream from mountaintops until his throat went raw, hurling himself off cliff sides, catching himself towards the bottom, the pressure of his feet hitting rock sides leaving his knees sore.

He ran and ran and ran until his lungs ached and his heart burned, and he couldn't see anymore. He ran back north until he was panting and crying.

He ran with the rings in his hand, pretending like his eyes weren't burning, or that he wasn't blind with tears.

He ran until he couldn't run anymore, and when he was able to blink through the blur in his eyes, his throat caught at the sight of what was in front of him.

In the dawn light, the mouth of his old cave looked back at him.

It wasn't the same way he'd left it; hidden with fallen branches and cobwebs. But it was still his cave, and it still left him with the awful, heavy feeling of loneliness as it did when he'd left.

He took a step back, curling his arms around himself.

In the dark, the cave seemed to be looming towards him, cold air gently coasting out from inside.

Sonic had spent years in the cold and that dark, alone and waiting for nothing in particular. His hands shook, and he thought about his bed in the attic; the smell of laundry detergent, lavender soap, and hugs goodnight.

His claws bit through the edges of his gloves, pricking his palms.

No. He wasn't going back to that. It was *cruel* to think that he could.

Hunching down, he crawled through the hole of the cave, batting at cobwebs with a stick, until he fell through and caught himself at the bottom.

There wasn't much left from when he'd left, two years ago. He squinted through the moonlight. A few road signs lay on the rocky floor, a pile of tin boxes he'd used to keep rations of food he'd taken from the dumpsters outside supermarkets.

Behind a little enclave, there was a stack of blankets.

He sniffled, pulling them free. They were molded and worn and damp from flooding, but they were almost the same colors as they'd been. He'd stolen them during a bad winter. Maddie had left them out for Tom to take to a local charity, and Sonic had swiped two from the top. They'd been his treasures through the winter; smelling like Maddie's lotion and Tom's shampoo and the house that he'd spent so much time around, hoping that this little piece of them was enough to consider himself a part of the family.

They'd lost the smell now. But they made an okay bed once he'd laid them down across one of the rocks.

Maybe things would have been easier if he'd never involved them in his life.

It was an awful thought, but it twisted around his ribs regardless.

They'd taken him in. They'd learned how to care for a child like him. And then they forgot.

They forgot about what he'd gone through.

They forgot what he'd never had.

They forgot what he needed.

They forgot about *him*.

And Tails and Knuckles? Maddie and Tom were perfectly ready to handle them after they'd spent their time figuring out parenthood with Sonic.

Who ruined everything.

It was better this way, he thought, as he settled on the blankets, looking up at the mouth of his cave. Better for everyone if he just stayed out of their way.

He slept in fits and starts. The noises of the forest, once so familiar, now made him jumpy. When he couldn't sleep, he stared at the satchel of rings.

He could go anywhere.

Anywhere in the universe.

He just had to picture it.

But the only thing he could picture when he shut his eyes was the front porch of 55 Plymouth Drive, the couch they piled together on for movie nights, the twinkle lights on his ceiling, a kitchen table stacked high with pancakes, his parents' bed on a Sunday morning.

His hands shook when he stood and faced one of the walls, grabbing one of the rings. He'd spent the first four years of his life in another world. Could still trace its hills and bridges and secluded hideaways, and so he did his best to push out front porches and kitchen tables and pictured *Home*.

He threw a ring, eyes closed tight.

When he peeked, all he saw was bunk beds.

So he tried again.

He pictured green hills and threw a ring.

But instead, he was met with their backyard.

He imagined the forests and threw a ring harder.

He was met with Maddie and Tom's empty room.

Think. Throw. Think. Throw.

He kept up the awful routine until his eyes stung and his chest hurt, and he tried one last agonizing time, remembering Longclaw's little hovel in the trees and tossed the ring hard enough for the muscles in his shoulder to burn.

The ring opened to the closed pantry of their kitchen. And on the other side, he swore he could hear coughing on the other side of the door. And Tom's voice, somewhere far off.

He snapped the portal shut before he could step through. They didn't want him there. They were too busy looking after their kids to worry about him. He scrubbed at his face, shoving his fist against his mouth to keep from letting the growing feeling out.

So the rings went away, and the satchel stayed cinched tight.

His eyes hurt, his muscles were sore, he was covered in a layer of grime, and his stomach was gnawing at itself, but he stayed where he was.

He couldn't go anywhere.

Not until he could picture something other than blue siding and a magnolia-wreathed door.

So even though the sun was high in the sky, seeping in through the cracks in the cave walls, he forced himself back to sleep.

A crackle of static startled him awake sometime after dark and he looked around, quills standing up, ready to attack an intruder.

Instead, he heard… Wade's voice?

"No sign of him yet. Mrs. Braverman said her lights flickered, but it was just a bad fuse. Sorry, Tom."

Another crackle of static and then his father's voice -scared and oh-so weary- answered. "Thanks, Wade. I'll check in again soon."

"Roger that." Static. "Hey Carl, anything from your neck of the woods?"

"Sorry, Wade. I left the chili dogs out just like you said, but the squirrels are the only ones who came to claim 'em."

"Dang it." A staticy sigh crackled through the radio and then, "For anybody just tuning in, this is a tri-county alert. We've got an APB on a missing child. Parents are Maddie and Tom Wachowski. Name is Sonic Wachowski. That's S-O-N-I-C. Age fifteen, three-feet, four inches tall, seventy-three pounds, green eyes, blue fur. Last seen in Green Hills, at 3:45 PM Friday afternoon. Again, this is a tri-county alert-"

Sonic didn't hear the rest because as he'd reached for the old police scanner, a spark shot off of his wrist and fried the thing. He pulled his hands to his chest, heart pounding.

He was-

They were-

Another spark hopped across the dirt floor and singed a leaf.

He had to calm down.

Shutting his eyes, he focused on his breathing.

In through the nose.

Out through the mouth.

Just like Mom had taught him.

Mom.

His cheeks were wet, but he kept on breathing.

When he opened his eyes again, his fur was no longer glowing.

Slowly, he pulled his phone out of his backpack, and turned it back on.

And was startled by how fiercely it buzzed in his hands.

Seventeen missed calls.

Fifty-seven texts.

Mostly from Mom and Dad, but there were messages from his grandparents, from Wade, from Jeremy, from Carl, a few from unknown numbers that identified themselves as other police teams under Tom, apparently having gotten his number from their frantic chief who'd sent them out on patrol.

He scrolled through texts from the night before, texts from the early morning, texts from the afternoon. Looking at the time on his phone, some were as recent as an hour ago. He wiped his eyes on the back of his hand. Not that it did much. His eyes refilled as fast as he dried them.

PRETZEL MOM [4:15 PM]: Sonic, call me back

PRETZEL MOM [5:02 PM]: Sonic, it's mom. Please call us when you see this

DONUT DAD [5:03 PM]: Sonic, I'm driving out. Give me a location and I'll get you, okay? Love you, bud. So much.

PRETZEL MOM [5:10 PM]: We love you so much. Call us, please?

DONUT DAD [9:02 PM]: Don't go anywhere we can't find you.

He had to hit the power button for a moment just to keep his breathing down. Why did it matter? The way they'd left things - he'd be lucky to be let into their house again. He'd been

progressively forgotten in the past two weeks. Maybe their worry would taper off once Tails and Knuckles had really settled in.

His grandparents had tried to call more than a few times (they'd never gotten the hang of texting) and had left voicemails with frantic questions and firm instructions.

"Sugar, your Mama just called me. Whatever bug's gotten up in your bonnet, it ain't something we can't work out. Call me back."

"Son, I know you think you can't go home, but our door is always open - no matter what. So before you think about hopping the next train to Saturn, you come ***here****, understand?"*

The texts from Jeremy were paragraphs about how much his own mother was freaking out, and how he hoped Sonic would pull it together and go home soon, because he wasn't ever going to have a best friend like him again.

Wade was more pragmatic somehow. Sending him locations where officers would be to check for him. Favorite spots. The library. The baseball field. The diner.

Carl called him a 'devil who's scarin ur mama senseless' and sent blurry photos of chili dogs.

He laughed tiredly, hiding his eyes beneath a heavy arm. He'd miss this. He'd missed it before he had it, and now that he had…

The laughter tapered away, and Sonic rolled onto his side, his face pressed into the old blankets. It wasn't fair. He'd wanted so much outside of his cave for so long; he didn't realize how much worse it would hurt to lose.

Thoughts of tragedy cut short when his stomach grumbled.

Maybe a snack before he hit the road again wouldn't be the worst idea.

Not So Crazy After All

Chapter Summary

In which chili dogs are eaten, a conversation is had, and a phone call is answered.

Chapter Notes

Invader_Sam Note: Hi again! Just wanted to pop in and say that Humanity and I have been overwhelmed in the BEST possible way by the reception this story has been getting! All your kudos, comments, and even fan art! Oh my goodness, we are BEYOND thrilled with all of it! So we just wanted to say a quick thank you! Now let's get on with the story! ^_^

When Carl opened the door of his trailer, he lowered his rifle at the site of the dirty hedgehog grinning guiltily up from his stoop. “You got any chili dogs the squirrel’s *haven’t* eaten?”

“Shoot, get in here, boy,” the old man said, setting the gun down and swooping to grab Sonic by one shoulder, pulling him inside. “You got the whole town in a tizzy, you know that?”

The door creaked shut behind them and Sonic hovered on the welcome mat while Carl shuffled around the overstuffed trailer. He heard water running and then he was being handed a wet rag.

“Wash your face, boy.”

Sonic did. It felt better than he’d expected it to. Then he followed Carl to the kitchenette. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you can’t sit at my table with mud on your face.”

“No, I mean before. What happened to the town?”

“What do you mean ‘what happened’?” Carl lit his lone burner with a match and laid the small frying pan down atop it. “You took off with those confounded rings a’yours. Your mama was convinced you’d be on the other side of the galaxy by now.” He crouched down and opened the little fridge tucked into his cabinets. He pulled out an open package of franks and a Mellow Yellow. “Here.” He held out the can, and then pulled it back. “Hmmm.”

“What?”

“I dunno. I usually have a policy *against* givin’ treats to boys who make their mamas cry.”

Sonic blinked. “I didn’t- she didn’t- …did she?”

“Came by a few hours ago with your old man in their truck, passin’ out photos’a you. Held it together pretty good, but Old Carl can see through anythin’. Both’a them looked like they’d been holding vigil at a dang funeral the way they were keepin’ it in.” He plucked something off a stack of letters by the little fridge and handed him the printout. It was a picture of the three of them from last summer after his adoption. They’d gotten a waitress at the little diner on Main Street to take it; Sonic tucked between the two of them, a ridiculously large hamburger half devoured on his plate.

They’d circled his image. Below that, typed in the largest font they could fit on the page, it read;

FIND OUR SON

LAST SEEN 3:45 PM FRIDAY, APRIL 22ND

VERY FAST; KEEP HIM TALKING UNTIL WE GET THERE

PLEASE HELP US GET HIM HOME

Below that, there was a list of his height, his weight, color of his fur and eyes, and their phone numbers.

“Told’m I didn’t need no printout. S’if I’m gonna forget what the Blue Devil looks like.”

Sonic set the printout down, swallowing hard. “Are you… going to call them?”

“Ain’t my job. I tried to catch you fer years. Plum tired of that.” He put one of the franks onto the pan, and the little trailer was filled with the sound of sizzling.

“Oh…”

“So. What’s your plan, then?”

“My… plan?”

“Where you’re gonna go next. You ain’t livin’ here. Don’t care what you say, but I ain’t makin’ room for no hedgehog in my house.”

“I- No.” Sonic popped the top on the soda can, flicking the tab back and forth until it broke off and skittered onto the table. “I’m the worst roommate ever, anyway.”

“How’s that now?”

“Just ask Tails.” Just saying the name brought up images of the little fox kit in tears and he put his head down, as if the broken tab on the table was fascinating.

“He didn’t like bunkin’ together, huh?”

“Mm-mmm.” Sonic shook his head. “Now he can have the top bunk. He’ll love it.”

Carl gave the pan a little shake, and the aroma filled the tiny space. “Can think of a few things he’d love more.” When Sonic looked up, the old man nodded in the direction of the pile of papers on the counter. “Your mama and daddy weren’t the only ones who had a flier.”

Sonic crept closer, peered up at the counter.

Photocopied onto blue paper was what had originally been written in crayon:

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS HEDGEHOG?

Below was a drawing that Tails had started and Knuckles had apparently added on to, of himself, with various attributes labeled: *hard head, fast feet, big mouth, little/big brother shaped.*

PROBABLY ON MUSHROOM PLANET

IF NOT, CALL SHERIFF’S OFFICE

“Oh…”

“Your mama ‘parently had to keep’em from comin’ along. Sick as dogs, the two of them.”

Sonic swallowed hard. His throat was still raw, and his eyes still ached, but the familiar sting was coming back regardless. He closed his eyes tight, tighter, but the feeling didn’t waver.

“They’ll forget about me.” His voice was little more than a croak now. “Just wait. They’ve been forgetting about me ever since- ever since *they* showed up. Give it a few weeks and they won’t even remember they had me around.”

“Who? Your ma and pa?” Carl barked out a dry laugh. “Oh, I doubt that.”

“You don’t know what it was like!”

“I can guess. I myself am one of *eight*.”

Sonic balked up at the man. “EIGHT?”

“Growin’ up on a farm, folks would just breed the workers they needed,” he said with a laugh. “An’ I was the oldest. Spent nearly as much time lookin’ after the younger ones as I did out in the fields.”

“That must’ve sucked,” the teen said without thinking. “I mean, sorry-”

“No, no, it sure as shoot did.” Carl busied himself opening a can of Hormel. “An’ I resented it, *and* them for a long time. Couldn’t wait to get out a’there.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Didn’t have to.” The old man poured the chili into a bowl and put the bowl in the microwave. “Got drafted. Spent three years in Vietnam.”

Sonic had learned about the war in school. *A waste of lives*, his teacher had called it. *Senseless war over something that they were bound to lose*. “That’s… I’m sorry.”

“Wasn’t my decision to go. But I made my own family while I was there. Wasn’t never expectin’ to. But we took care’a one another until we couldn’t.”

“Do you still talk?”

“Dead men don’t talk.” The microwave beeped, and he took the steaming bowl out. “I still read their letters when I can. Got pictures, too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I ain’t.” Carl put down the bowl, scooping chili into the bun. “I knew’m before they left. They’d’a died anyway. Most boys out there did. But I got to know them. Lots of them were like me, too. Parents who didn’t notice they were missin’, or didn’t much care. So we got ta’ care for each other before their time was up.”

It was a morbid idea, but it left its mark in a way Sonic didn’t expect, settling hard against the tight ball that had been festering at his chest.

“I’m glad they knew you, too,” he said, quietly, tracing the lines of Tails’ drawing with his finger.

“You know, my mama and daddy were still alive when I got back, and when I reached out, they didn’t answer. Never took my letters.”

“Did you see them again?”

“Never could. They moved while I was away. Never left an address or nothin’.” He shrugged. “It hurt, but I knew it would happen the way it did. My parents never much cared about me or any’a the rest of their kids. Don’t know if they had more. Don’t know which are alive now, or where they’re at. Could be an uncle seven times over an’ I’d never know.” He nodded towards the stack of papers in front of Sonic. “An’ I can promise ya’ that nona’ them ever passed out no fliers to get their boy home.”

“They’ll forget,” Sonic said weakly, looking down at the fliers.

“I didn’t set up hundreds’a failed traps to think you were an idiot, boy.”

“If they cared so much, then why-”

“Why’d they make ya feel like they didn’t?” Carl finished for him. “Well, I got news for you, boy, your parents’re human. And humans make mistakes. Even perfectly wonderful ones like your mama and daddy. And sometimes perfectly wonderful parents are in over their heads and even their very best ain’t good enough. S’up to us whether we forgive’m for it.” He set a plate down at the tiny fold-out table and pointed at the bench seat. “Now eat. ‘Fore it gets cold.”

Sonic couldn’t think of anything else to say.

So he sat.

And he ate.

It was around 3 AM on what was officially Sunday morning when his phone rang.

Sonic jumped, nearly falling off the little bench at Crazy Carl’s kitchenette table. They’d been sitting together quietly. Carl had shown Sonic a few of the letters from his time in Vietnam before going and answering his own phone calls from Wade with *sorry, haven’t seen him*.

And so when Sonic’s phone lit up, his mom’s name and picture on the screen, Sonic didn’t know what to do.

“What if they’re mad at me?” He curled his legs up. “I was a jerk to them before I left. And I was *worse* to Tails and Knuckles.”

“Probably are spittin’ mad at you,” Carl said with a shrug. “Ain’t everyday their baby runs out with a pack’a portal rings. Be surprised if they weren’t.”

“They probably hate me.”

Carl laughed. “If that’s what you wanna think.”

Sonic gnawed at his lip, looking down. “Do I… answer it?”

“Up to you. Like I said, ain’t my job.”

The phone went dark, and he nearly breathed out, but then his mothers face reappeared, calling again.

“Ain’t gonna answer itself, boy,” Carl said, licking chili off his fingers.

Still hugging his knees, he took a deep breath, raised one shaking hand, and pushed the green button. “H-hi Mom.”

Her shocked, terrified cry hit him head on.

“Ohmygodbaby! Baby! Oh my god!! *Are you alright?! Are you hurt*?”

Her voice made the tears harder to hold back.

“M’fine, Mom.”

From behind her, he could hear Tom’s voice. “*Is that him!?”*

“He answered, Tom!”

“Sonic! *Sonic, it’s Dad!* Are you- Is he okay? *Oh my god, oh my god,* where is he?”

“Sonic-!?”

“I’m with Carl, Mom.” His eyes were filling again, and he pushed them against his knees.

She must have put him on speaker, because Tom’s voice was clearer when he said, “*Stay there* , okay? I’m coming to get you. Right now. Just- just *stay there* , okay, bud? *Promise* me you’ll stay there.”

Sonic pressed his eyes harder against his knees, trying very hard not to let the sob at the base of his throat escape. It did anyway.

Carl must have realized the teen was done talking and took the phone. “Hiya there, Sheriff. I got your boy here. Smells like a sewer an’ looks right tossed around, but he’s alright. I ain’t gonna let him go nowhere.”

Thank you, Sonic could hear his Dad’s voice from where he sat. *I’ll call off the APB and- just thank you. So much, Carl.*

“Just let everyone know I finally caught the blue devil an’ we’ll be even.”

They talked for another minute before Carl hung up and put the phone back down in front of the hedgehog who had yet to look up. “Not gonna run on us again, are ya?”

Against his knees, Sonic shook his head.

“Good. Cause I’ve been tryin’ to catch you for years. This is the closest I ever got.”

The headlights of Tom’s truck cut through the early morning dark just before 3:30 AM. Seeing as Carl’s trailer was a good hour from their own house, Tom must have been driving well beyond what the speed limits advised.

Sonic had yet to take his head off his knees, and so he heard the engine cutting, flinching when Carl went to open his trailer door. His claws dug into his shins through the gloves and he thought he'd never uncurl again. But then his father was calling his name in a cracking voice and suddenly the boy was moving as fast as he ever had, scattering papers and rattling the furniture as he hurled himself into strong arms that smelled like sugar glaze and grass.

They went down hard. It had been too much force on his part, and how Tom managed to catch him he wasn't sure, especially as the two of them hurdled downward, Tom landing on his back against gravel. Sonic didn't even think Tom would want to hold on as tight as he did, but the arms pulled him in close, close, closer, until they were practically woven together on Carl's driveway.

Somehow, maybe with Carl's help - Dad got upright again, but Sonic didn't notice, too busy sobbing apologies and being shushed. The grown-ups kept talking over his head, but it was as if he were underwater for as little as he heard. Then somehow he was in his carseat. Then somehow he was being carried up the front steps, and Mom was running down to meet them and wound herself around them, and there was lavender and his name over and over and peppered, frantic kisses and he was grabbing at her hands as they touched his face, and his shoulders, and his arms, and his legs; checking to see if he was really there, really here, really safe and really okay. The screen door opened and slammed shut and Ozzie was barking at Dad's feet. He sobbed more apologies and got shushed some more and told 'tomorrow'.

And then Dad settled down in one of the easy chairs in the living room and Mom took the matching one on the other side of the couch and Tails and Knuckles slept through the whole thing. He stayed in Dad's lap. Dad wouldn't let go. He didn't want Dad to let go. Ozzie laid down by Mom's chair. He stared at them. At all of them. He never wanted to stop staring at them, but his eyelids were too heavy and when Dad started snoring just above his head he let himself finally fall asleep.

Home Again Home Again

Chapter Summary

Sonic returns home where he belongs and a lonely history begins to unravel itself from the shadows.

Chapter Notes

Humanity here! Invader_Sam and I were SO OVERWHELMED by the amount of fan art and comments that we decided to publish this chapter a little early!!!

And FYI - next chapter we'll be dropping some information about a little something we've got in store for all of you ;) Keep your eyes peeled for a surprise coming your way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sonic woke up being held, with his Mother's voice above him.

"Mmhmm, around three-thirty this morning… Yeah. Yeah, no, not hurt. Not really in a good place to chat right now- of course. Of course he knows, Rosie. He knows. I'll make *sure* he knows. I'll call you later today, okay? Okay, yeah. Yep. Love to Big T. Mmhmm. Bye."

He was on Maddie's lap while she sat on the couch, cartoons playing softly on the television. She put the cellphone down, bringing her hand to stroke his back, and he could feel her chin against the top of his head.

His eyes and throat ached, but at the smell of lavender he felt them sting all over again.

He shut his eyes tight and her hand stalled.

"Sonic, baby?"

He sniffled, turning his face against her shoulder.

She held him a little tighter, her voice quivering. "God, Sonic. I think I lost ten years these past two days."

He choked out a noise. "M'sorry, mom."

She dipped down, pressing a firm kiss between his ears. When he peeked up, he could see the dried tracks on her face. He went to look down again, the sight burning, but she moved her hands to hold his face gently, making sure their eyes met. “Don’t you *ever* leave like that again.” Her face fell. “God, baby… if you left… I just don’t know what I’d- I mean-” Her eyes brimmed. “You’re everything to me. You know that, baby? *Everything* .”

He couldn’t find the words. She didn’t make him, pulling him close again, rocking.

On the other side of the couch, Tails and Knuckles huddled together, the little one under the arm of the bigger, a bucket on the coffee table in front of them. The echidna kept his eyes respectfully averted, pretending to be interested in whatever was on the TV, but Tails was staring.

Sonic peeked out from against Maddie’s t-shirt just enough to make eye contact with the fox.

At the acknowledgement, Tails drew up the courage to speak. “I know you’re mad at me, but I’m not mad at you,” he said, quietly, looking down at his hands holding a blanket tight around himself. “M’glad you came home.”

Sonic wanted to tell him that he wasn’t mad. That he’d been an absolute jerk. That he’d overreacted. That he had his own issues, and that he shouldn’t have heaped them onto his brothers.

Instead; “I saw the flier,” he croaked, still leaning on Maddie’s chest, her heartbeat a steady presence at his ear. “You- you did a really good job.”

Tails looked back up. “Really?”

Sonic nodded, and Maddie’s arms squeezed him close encouragingly. “Didn’t know my little brother was an artist.”

It wasn’t much of an apology. That would be later, when he didn’t feel like he was drowning, but it was encouragement enough for Tails to creep closer.

Over Tails’ head, Sonic looked at Knuckles.

The eldest avoided eye contact, folding his now-empty arms over the side of the couch and laying his chin down on them. “It is good to see you back, Brother,” he said, matter of fact, but his voice was thin, strained.

Sonic had to look away before his heart could sink any lower.

Tom found them like that. He’d apparently gone to the pharmacy to finally grab more flu medicine, speeding back as if he expected Sonic to be gone when he returned.

“Hey bud,” he whispered, the moment delicate enough to shatter. He put the bags down, sitting in the tight space between Maddie’s full lap and Knuckles so he could dip down and kiss Sonic between the ears. He lingered a moment, breathing his son in, before winding his arms around the boy and holding just as tight as he had the night before. His voice was as rough as Maddie’s, his eyes just as red.

Sonic hated that Carl was right. He hadn't deserved that soda.

"Hi, Dad…" He absentmindedly toyed with a button on Tom's shirt. "I'm sorry-"

"We'll talk later about that tonight, alright? After we all get some rest."

He nodded, still exhausted.

Tails coughed again, and Tom made a move to reach for the bucket, but the kit waved him off. He settled back down to look at Sonic again. " Friday night," he said, "you took the rings."

Sonic's face burned.

"Would you-" Tom swallowed, "would you have used them?"

The unspoken part of that sentence hovered between the three of them.

Would you have used them to leave us?

The tears he'd been holding back so well lurched up, and Sonic shook his head. "Couldn't," he whispered.

Maddie wiped his face.

"Good," said Tom, just as watery, hugging them again, pressing a firm kiss between Sonic's ears. "Because we wouldn't have let you go."

The rest of the afternoon was spent screening calls and confirming that he'd been found while they stayed huddled together on the couch.

But The Talk was bound to happen, and so after a shower and a long nap in front of the television, Sonic knew it was time when Tom looked at him from the steps and said, "Sonic, could you come up here?"

He'd been showing Tails how to hold the Nintendo controller, and slid off the couch without protest, following him slowly up the stairs.

Maddie was just coming out of the bathroom with her hair in a scarf when they walked in. She looked tired and worn down, and he knew too well whose fault that was.

"So before we start," Tom said, drawing his attention away, "we just want to make sure you know that Mom and I wanted to have a talk yesterday after your game."

"We had a whole plan," Maddie said, nodding. "We were going to take you to the Mountainside Diner and get those burgers you like and have a talk about all of these changes going on in the house. Because we *know* this hasn't been easy. Especially on you."

"Oh…" He picked at a loose thread on his glove. "I didn't think- I mean-"

“We noticed.” Tom grabbed his hand. “Of *course* we noticed.”

It shouldn’t have been as much of a surprise as it was. His parents had always been good at figuring him out; from his insane ideas to his less than subtle moods.

“We know that this has been a lot for you.” Maddie’s hand moved carefully up and down his back in a soothing rhythm. “And that’s partly our fault. It’s been difficult on us, too. Trying to figure out how to raise two new kids in such a short amount of time…”

“Mom and I should have talked first about how this might have happened. Maybe even sat you down for the same talk, too. There’s a lot of things we could have done at the beginning to make this whole thing easier. On *all* of us.”

“ *But* ,” Maddie added before Sonic could speak up, and his ears flattened, “It doesn’t excuse what happened Friday. Or how you’ve been handling everything. You know that, right?”

“Yeah…” the fifteen year old whispered. “Yeah, I know that.”

“Dad and I talked while you were… *away* ,” she chose her words carefully, the panic of the last two days still raw. “And we think there’s a lot of stuff you haven’t talked about. From your time *before* us.”

“Would that be a fair guess, bud?”

Sonic shrugged.

“Whatever you went through-” his father began, struggling to find the words, “we know it’s not easy to talk about. A whole lot of big words and big ideas.”

“But we *want* you to share those. Because it’ll make moving forward a little easier. Because that’s all that’s going to happen, honey. We’re going to move forward. And that’s going to mean that our lives will be *different* than when you first got here.”

“And it’ll be easier to do that.” Tom added, “if we know what you’re feeling and what you need.”

Sonic sat between them a moment, running through the words. They clumped together just under his stomach. “I don’t know,” he said, trying to keep the shadows out of his voice. “It might make me a little less hero-y. Secret tragic backstory and all that.” When neither Tom or Maddie laughed, he sank against his knees. “It’s not a *nice* story,” he muttered. “And… it’ll make you sad. Because it makes *me* sad.”

“That’s okay.” Maddie lifted him onto her lap, winding both arms around him from behind. “I’m sure we’ll both be sad, because we love you. And the idea that you didn’t have us there makes me sad all the time already. But we *want* to hear it. And we think it’ll help.”

“I don’t know…” He curled his legs closer to his chest. “I don’t even know *how* to-”

“Mom and I talked about that, too.” Tom shuffled closer. “She thought maybe talking to someone else might help.”

“Like Wade?”

Unlike his failed joke, that at least got a laugh out of both adults.

“Like a doctor,” Maddie corrected. “A therapist. Someone who knows how to help.” She smoothed back his fur. “I’ve gone before during some low points. And so has Tom.”

“… really?”

“Mmmhm. It helps. I went when my parents passed away, years before you came to us. And Dad went while he was working extra jobs to help me through school.”

Crazy Carl’s declaration of *your parents are human* was practically thrumming in the air, and Sonic let it. And maybe (just maybe) it applied to him, too. Humanness aside. History was a tricky thing, and you never really knew what people could have bundled up in their heads, like forgotten boxes in an attic, or wars in trailers, or hedgehogs in a cave for years and years on their own.

He took a huge yoga breath in, and on the exhale; “yeah,” he said just loud enough for his parents to hear, their eyes meeting. “Yeah. That sounds… okay.”

“Good.” Maddie dipped down to kiss his head. “We’ll start looking, and then we’ll start asking more questions.”

“What if-” His head spun, and he blinked away the burning behind his eyes. “What if I’m not ready to tell you?”

Tom thought about the question a moment, pursing his lips. “How about,” he said, slowly, “we try to ask *one hard question* a day.”

“Just one?”

“Just one,” Tom nodded.

He thought about his ten years of solitude and how it sometimes clawed its way through him like vines, choking the life out of trees. It might be nice to trim them away. Might be nice to feel like he could breathe again whenever he thought too hard about *forgotten* and *dark* and *alone* .

“Okay,” Sonic decided, feeling Maddie’s hands tense around him. “Okay. That… that could work.”

Tom grinned, looking happier than he had in days, and Sonic understood.

“So is that it? Big talk over for the day, or-”

Maddie tightened her grip. “Whoa there. Not so fast, buckaroo. You still gave me and Dad an early look at our graves these past two days.”

“I said I was sorry!” He tipped his head back, woeful eyes meeting his mother’s much harder ones. “And I *meant it!* And- and we were having this great bonding moment-!”

“Bonding moment or not, you’re still in hot oil, bud.”

He slumped down dramatically with a groan. “What’ll it be? The stocks? The pillory?”

Tom flicked his nose. “Two weeks, no switch, no video games, phone is for calls *only*, and we'll hold onto it at night.”

“Oh, *come on* .”

“You’re back here right after school for homework. You can go to practice and games, but no friends' houses.”

“That’s inhumane!”

“Try going through what we went through and then we’ll talk inhumane.”

Maddie let him go so that she could better look him in the eye. “And we’re taking the rings, too. Just until the two weeks are up.”

That surprised him enough to meet both their gazes. “You’re not… taking them away? *For good?* ” He almost expected that they would after the threat he’d laid down, but Tom and Maddie both shook their heads.

“They’re not ours to take,” said Tom. “And even though the last two days were some of the worst I think I’ve ever had, we still want to trust you. You’re our son. We love you. And we’ve got to hope that that’s enough.”

The hedgehog’s eyes filled again, and he tried to brush off their looks with a watery laugh. “Thought I’d cried enough for a week. Really putting a dent in my whole *tough guy* act, you know that?”

Tom gave him a serious look. “Wait. You had a tough guy act?”

Despite the tears, when Sonic laughed again, it was brighter than it had been in what felt like forever-

And then he paused.

The dark feeling in his stomach was coming back tenfold, except now it felt less like an awful bundle of anxiety and more like his body was mid-fall. Carefully, he sat up, which was a terrible idea. The swimming in his head that he’d pinned on too much crying lurched forward.

“I don’t…” he said slowly.

“You don’t want to be grounded?” Tom gave him a look. “Not how it works, bud.”

Maddie nodded. “Just because we had this nice talk doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. You’ll survive for two weeks without your switch.”

“No,” said Sonic, “I mean… I don’t- I don't feel-”

He didn’t get through the rest of the sentence before tipping forward and vomiting across Tom’s lap.

Chapter End Notes

Me again!

Next chapter will be sometime soon. Get ready for a little SURPRISE along with it. That's all I'll say for now...

Y'all are gonna be fed well, I promise.

Revalations in the Light of the Late Night TV

Chapter Summary

In which a third brother is sick, and a second important talk is had.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Well, boys, it looks like our planned bonding session is happening a little sooner than we'd planned."

Tom was in brand new pajamas, still soaked through from the shower, by the time he and Maddie had settled all three boys onto the couch.

Settled was a generous term, though.

Sonic was on one side.

Knuckles had pushed himself as far into the opposite side of the couch as possible and had taken Tails with him.

"Turns out, Mr. *Immune to Everything* here is definitely not so immune." Maddie gave Tails a look, and he dipped down further into the blankets, hiding. "Seems like we may have invited a super-spreader into our midst."

"Sorry, Mommy…" said Tails pitifully from the nest of blankets.

"Nothing we can do about it now, honey, except get better. But hey, maybe this was a blessing in disguise." She shook out the comforter she'd taken from Sonic's bed, laying it across her son. "We've been wanting you three to have a nice, long talk. Just don't love that it took an infectious eight year old to get there."

Sonic looked over at Knuckles, barely hiding the panic behind his green eyes. "Can't I just stay with you and Dad," he hissed. "Your bed's plenty big!"

"It's easier if you're here," she said, too cheerfully for his liking. "Keep you all concentrated in one spot."

"And our bed's already seen enough of Carl's chili dogs for one day," Tom added, glumly. "I think the couch would be jealous if it didn't get in on that action."

Knuckles looked over Tails' head at Maddie and Tom. "What if *I* do not want him here? Then may he return to your burrow for the night?"

Sonic flinched beneath his quilt.

“Not really how this works.” Tom raised a lone eyebrow, leaning down to adjust Knuckles’ covers. “He’s your brother. You’re all sick.”

Knuckles thought a moment before giving a stiff nod. “As long as he does not touch the youngest.”

“Hey!” Tails coughed and then peeked up at Knuckles. “I can take care of myself!”

“*Quiet,* weak one,” said Knuckles down to Tails. “The parasites have made their way into your brain. You are delusional.”

“That’s not how germs work.”

The echidna waved him off. “I will not permit him to hurt you again.”

“I won’t hurt him!” Sonic glared past his dad. “I would *never*.”

“Your words do not align with your actions from Friday.”

“I said I was *sorry* about that!”

“So when *you* apologize, we all must accept it, yet when *I*-”

“S’not what I meant.” Sonic’s face burned past the fever. “He’s my little brother, too!”

“You *do not* get to freely use titles you so despise!”

“Ow!” squeaked Tails, squished to Knuckles’ side. “Get *off!* Mom-!”

“Boys! *Stop it* .” Maddie stood before them, hands on her hips. “It has been the *world’s longest weekend* already. I don’t have the spoons to mediate a fight right now. So if you don’t want to talk, *fine* . I really wish you *would* . But for tonight, I’ll take just sitting in the same room and not trying to punch each other. Now.” She stepped forward and went down the row, kissing the tops of each of their heads. “It’s light’s out. Good night.”

They mumbled *goodnights* after her.

Tom lingered in the doorway, hand on the light switch. “Things’ll look better in the morning, guys.” He flicked the switch, darkening the room. “God, I hope things look better in the morning,” they heard him sigh as he padded up the stairs.

The clock in the hall struck eleven. Face pressed against the throw pillow, sweating and shivering under the comforter they’d dragged down from the attic, Sonic sighed. It was no use, he was too uncomfortable to sleep. His stomach churned and his body ached and his eyes refused to close, no matter how heavy they felt. With a groan, he rolled over onto his back-

-and caught Knuckles watching him in the dark, eyes flashing beneath the flickering glow of the television.

The moment their eyes met, the echidna turned his away, shifting under the blanket he shared with Tails, pulling the fox kit closer still.

Can't sleep either, huh?" Sonic forced himself to attempt small talk. Had to start somewhere, after all.

Knuckles merely grunted.

"Least you can keep food down again." With ungloved hands (Mom had taken them all for deep-cleaning), he gestured at the saltines and ginger ale cans on the coffee table. "I'm forty-eight hours behind you two. Still got the worst of it ahead of-"

"You talk too much."

Sonic clamped his mouth shut, frowning. Then, because he couldn't help himself, he began, "Mom said we were supposed to-"

"I know what Mother said," Knuckles interrupted. "But in my experience, when you speak, you do very little listening."

Sonic pushed himself up to sitting, wincing as he did so. "Alright, alright, you got something to say? 'Cause you've barely said five words since I got-"

"I have been *trying*. For *weeks*. To speak to you," Knuckles cut him off again. "But you were too caught up in your jealousy to even realize. Now you will listen." He paused, waiting to see if the hedgehog would protest. When the younger teen stayed quiet, he nodded. "Mother has told me… some of what your life was like before you came to them. You, like myself, were left alone at a tender age. You, like myself, had to survive, unassisted, for ten years. You, like myself, longed for connection, for family. You, like myself, have finally found what we have longed for- only-" He turned and fixed Sonic with a hard stare. "*I* do not deserve this… because *you* found them first."

Sonic swallowed, lowered his eyes.

Knuckles shook his head. "I would like to say that, were our positions reversed, I would not have felt as you do. But then I think of Mother's touch and I wonder." He huffed out a small laugh, and at his side, Tails stirred. Quickly he reached up and rubbed the fox behind the ears, soothing him back to stillness.

"Yeah, she's got that effect on people," Sonic muttered.

"I love her. I love them both." He said it so quietly that for a second Sonic thought he'd misheard. But then he continued. "After my father- after he fell, I did not think I would ever feel such a thing again." He curled his arms around Tails, idly tracing his fingers over the circle of peach fuzz that marked where the burn had been on his arm. "I tried to tell her, as she dressed my wound, but was waylaid by cowardice."

“It took me six months,” Sonic admitted, eyes on the older boy. “So, you know, you’re already ahead of the curve.”

Knuckles smiled wanly. “I do not wish to take them from you. But neither do I wish to deny my feelings for them.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Sonic hugged his knees. “And I’m… sorry I made you feel like you did.”

“They are not the only ones I have come to love in such a short time.” Knuckles dipped his muzzle to brush his nose against the fur atop Tails’ head, then rose again to look at Sonic. “I have always wished for brothers.”

The hedgehog’s tired eyes stung and he swiped at them. “Geez, man…”

Another soft laugh came from the echidna, wet this time. “I wept in Mother’s office that day. The first time I had shed tears since my father left for battle. My heart had been sealed shut for so long, I fear now I shall always be cursed to feel everything too deeply.”

“Join the club,” Sonic said shakily. “We should get t-shirts made.”

“That would be incredibly embarrassing.”

“I know, man- s’a joke. S’what I do when things get mushy.” At Knuckles’ raised eyebrow, he added, “When I ‘feel things too deeply’.”

“Ah.”

“I’m working on it. I swear.” He scrubbed his face and then stretched out and grabbed the water bottle from the coffee table. A small sip helped his dry mouth. “And I’ll… work on listening more, too. I didn’t know you’d been on your own since, uh, since everything went down.”

“The village was my home. Where else was I to go? Besides, I had duties there.”

“Huh?”

“The pyres were not about to build themselves, and it would have been the worst dishonor to leave my tribe strewn across the battlefield.”

“You- holy shit.” Sonic’s stomach turned and he put a fumbling hand on the bucket beside him. “*Knuckles*.”

The echidna cleared his throat and reached for his own water. “I did what needed to be done. And the work distracted me from my grief.” He pulled the top off the bottle and drank. “But I can admit now that I was, how did you put it? Trying to age too quickly?”

“Trying to grow up too fast,” Sonic correctly gently. “Did you…? You didn’t tell Mom and Dad about that, did you?”

“I have not spoken of those days with *anyone* until now. Why?”

“‘Cause they want me to do that. Talk about *before*. With them. Maybe with a doctor.”

“Mother is a doctor.”

“A different kind of doctor. The kind you talk to about the hard stuff.” Sonic put his bottle down, sat up a little straighter. “They think it might help. Mom and Dad said they’re looking for one for me.” The admission took more bravery than he thought it would, and he had to look away a moment to quell his flu-tumbling stomach. “Maybe it would be good for you, too?

“I suppose. I do feel better for having had this talk, the two of us.” Knuckles took another drink before returning his own bottle to the table. “And Mother and Father have not misled me yet.”

“Yeah, they’re annoyingly right about most stuff.”

Knuckles laughed again, almost woke Tails, and hurriedly shushed him, carefully easing the kit over to his opposite side. Then he stretched out his newly-free arm. “Come.”

“Huh?”

“I said *come* .” Knuckles waved again. “The distance between us has been far too great.”

“You seriously wanna snuggle right now?"

“I do, yes. Do you not?”

“Didn’t say *that*... ” Sonic muttered, already crawling on hands and knees over to the other side of the couch.

“Don’t forget the bucket.”

“Right, right, yeah.” As the hedgehog set the bucket down closer by and leaned against the echidna’s side, he sighed again. “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. Look at us now.”

Knuckles’ arm draped across blue shoulders. “We are as we should be,” he said. “Together.” Eyes on his quilt, Sonic felt Knuckles’ cheek press against the top of his head.

The clock ticked on. In front of them, the television flickered soundlessly, cartoons moving across the screen.

He’d always been the strongest entity in their house, in their *town*. He’d even bragged once or twice about how the world hadn’t ever seen someone as strong as him.

And so it had been a shock when he’d finally met Knuckles.

Better trained.

Better controlled.

Just — *Better*.

As much as he was loath to admit it, the echidna was stronger than he'd ever hope to be.

It had been intimidating. A constant battle. Trying to match him at every turn.

Now, on the couch, with Knuckles' arm around him, it was something else.

Perhaps it was knowing that the True Strongest Warrior had his arms within crushing distance.

Or maybe, if Sonic actually stopped long enough to let those uncomfortable, big thoughts take up space in his head, then maybe it would be easier to admit that having Knuckles beside him like this was a comfort. He sort of understood where Tails came from, moving just steps behind Sonic and Knuckles at every turn. Who wouldn't when they were impressed by the feats of someone that used all of their will and power to look over *them* .

"You know," he said quietly, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the television screen, "I've never- I mean-" he cleared his throat. "I know I'm really annoying, and I'm not good at talking, or listening."

"Or making pancakes. Or expressing emotions. Or punching. Or kicking. Or-"

"Do you want me to talk or not?"

Knuckles fell silent, drumming Sonic's shoulder with the pads of his fingers, careful not to nick him with the points of the spikes that pressed through his fur. "Apologies. I was attempting humor."

"Swing and a miss."

"You are too ill for your based ball."

Sonic sighed. "I'm just saying," he tried again, even quieter than before. "If you wanted to be my big brother. That would be alright, I guess."

Knuckles went quiet in thought. Sonic held his breath.

"Not possible," said Knuckles, and Sonic wanted very badly to hide away until the echidna began speaking again. "I cannot begin calling you my younger brother if you already exist as such. Circumstances or denial or complicated feelings will not change that. Nor will it change my affection"

Sonic had to close his eyes tight. "Oh," he choked. "Okay."

The broad chest beside him rose and fell slowly, and he worked to match it. He was just starting to manage it when-

“I love you, Brother.”

Sonic’s breath hitched in his throat. “Uh-”

Then the echidna was nuzzling the top of his head. “My fear held me back in Mother’s office. I will not let it continue to do so. But you don’t have to say any-”

“Love you too, man.”

He got another nuzzle for that, and Knuckles made a noise that sounded suspiciously like purring.

There was a sniffling, but for once it *wasn’t* coming from him.

“Little one?” Knuckles murmured.

Under the blanket, Tails reached out, found Sonic’s closest hand, and held tight. “I love you guys, too,” he wobbled. “M’glad you’re not fighting anymore.”

Sonic squeezed the fox’s hand. “Brothers fight sometimes.”

“This will probably not be the last time,” Knuckles added.

“It took longer to make up, ‘cause we didn’t know how,” Sonic said. “But we figured it out. So, you know, we know for next time.”

Against Knuckles’ chest, Tails nodded.

“Sleep, little one,” the echidna told him. “Both of you. We will all still be here in the morning.”

Sonic yawned, and let himself relax, finally comfortable enough to let his eyes flutter closed.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Invader-Sam here, saying thanks again for all the love and support we've gotten! Also, I've got a message from Humanity:

We've been sitting on this for a while, but we couldn't wait anymore!

This fic is nearly done with just a few more chapters left to go. But that doesn't mean the story's over! Instead, we will be continuing into a sequel!!!

What will this sequel be about, you may ask? Good question!

Many of you have been guessing and hoping for a Knuckles-Centric story, and those who did were right on the money.

Plenty of angst and found family feels ahead, you guys.

Check out our tumblrs for a sneak peek!!

Chicken Soup (And Whiskey) For The Soul

Chapter Summary

In which the cavalry arrives to help with a trio of sick kids.

Unfortunately, the morning Knuckles spoke of was morning in name only. Long before dawn, Sonic's stomach woke him rudely. He filled the bucket, and then, when that wasn't enough, he staggered to the bathroom.

Knuckles got it into his head that this meant his newly-minted little brother was officially dying and went to wake his parents to light a pyre, Tails toddling in after looking absolutely bereft.

"Like I did for my father and the warriors so many years ago!" he declared, trying very hard to hide the way his lower lip wobbled. Tails didn't hide it at all, sobbing beside Knuckles, trying to catch his breath between each cry.

"Okay," Tom grunted as he'd hauled himself to sit, feet on the floor. "We're gonna upack that little gem ASAP."

"My nearly-departed brother believes I should speak to a *mental healer* of sorts."

"Maddie."

"Adding it to the list," she said before giving Knuckles a tight hug. "Seems like all our kids might need some extra help."

Knuckles sniffled. "Sonic needs it most right now, Mother. His impending death is upon us. I am just pleased we declared our brotherly love last night."

Maddie's hold on their eldest tightened. "That's- oh wow. That's amazing, sweetheart. I mean, we didn't expect anything like that so *soon* , but that's-"

"It is fortuitous," Knuckles said, pushing away to drop his head mournfully. "As he will be dying tonight."

Tails let out another screeching wail.

Maddie sighed. "He's not *dying*."

"He was always weaker than I, Mother. Now my brother will pay the price for refusing my training. Ten extra squats may have kept him from the grave!"

Maddie hefted a still crying Tails into her arms. “He said Sonic’s *dying*,” he cried. “He can’t *die!*”

“And yet-”

“*Mommy!?”*

“I promise you he’s not. Knuckles, stop scaring your brother. Now both of you, back to the couch. Tom?”

“I’ll take first puke duty.”

“Thank you, babe.”

Tom took first shift, sitting on the floor of the bathroom. Second shift was Maddie’s, but Tom joined her for the start anyway.

“Sorry,” Sonic said, lying on the cool floor, fever seemingly having decided to barbecue him alive. “This week sucked, and I keep making it worse.”

“You’re here,” said Tom. “Nothing else matters, alright?”

Maddie agreed with her husband, humming as she untangled a few of Sonic’s sweatier quills. “Reminds me of when you first got here. When we had to skip that concert.”

Sonic tried to hide his face against the bathmat. “I keep messing up…” he muttered into the fuzz.

“Hey hey hey. We were happy to stay home. We’re happy to be here now, even if that *here* is the bathroom at 2 am on a Monday.”

“Besides. We both took today and tomorrow off,” said Tom. “Family emergency.”

Sonic nodded into the bath mat. “Not my first time I’ve been sick here, though.” He rolled onto his side, cool floor doing wonders for his damp face. “Caught something a few winters ago and I ended up bunking in your garage with those blankets you were gonna donate.” He flinched. “Never said sorry for stealing them. Sorry.”

Maddie patted his face with a cool washcloth. “Sweetheart…”

Her son tried a wobbly smile, eyes wet. “Told you it’d make you sad.”

“It does,” Tom said. “It makes us *so* sad. But I’m glad you told us. We want to know.” His watch beeped, and he reached into one of the pharmacy bags. “Alright, kiddo. Second dose is up.”

“But it’s *grape*,” Sonic mumbled into the floor. “Why’d you have to get *grape?*”

“Because Knuckles was here to make requests. Now c’mon. Fever isn’t gonna fight itself.”

It was just before 8 AM when the sound of a car pulling up in the driveway alerted a very sleep-deprived mother.

Maddie rubbed her eyes, sitting up from where she'd accidentally fallen asleep next to Knuckles on the couch. "Tom?*Tom?"* She reached and poked her husband's shoulder.

Tom, bucket on his lap, startled awake. "Huh?"

"Someone's here."

"*What?"*

"Someone's outside."

"So let'm stay outside," he whispered back. "I don't think I've seen sleep in three days."

"*Thomas.* "

He rubbed his face. "It's probably just someone tryin' to sell something."

Maddie twisted around to look out the window. "Oh my god."

"What? Is it girl scouts? Tell'm two boxes of tagalongs-"

"It's your *parents."*

That got Tom up, banging his knee against the coffee table in his attempt to scramble to his feet. "*Now?"* He whispered, doing his best to not wake up the pile of sick kids on the couch. "Jesus! I don't think I've ever looked worse!"

"Speak for yourself," Maddie hissed back, gesturing to the boxers and t-shirt she'd thrown on. "I think I still smell like vomit."

"You do."

"*Thomas Michael Wachoswki."*

"So do I!"

He got to the door before his parents could knock and wake up the kids, urgently hushing Ozzie when he bounded towards the front door.

"Mom! Dad! What're you doing here?"

"What do you *think* we're doing here? Our grandbabies are sick a nd two days ago I thought I might've lost the first one you finally gave me! Now you let me in to see'em this instant or so help me I will *drop* you where you stand."

Tom leaned against the door jam, chuckling. "Wouldn't take much at this point. But they're finally all sleeping-"

“Then we’ll be quiet while we wait,” she told him.

Behind her, arms loaded with shopping bags, Tom Sr. said, “No use arguing with her when she’s like this, son.”

“I’m aware.” Tom scrubbed his face, and then stepped back. “C’mon in.”

His mother patted his unshaven cheek as she walked past him. “You look like death on a triscuit, you know.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Smell like it, too.”

“So does Maddie.”

“Don’t talk about a lady like that, Thomas. Even if she did smell, I don’t wanna hear you sayin’ it.”

“Yes, Mom.”

(Though as soon as she was inside, he could hear her very clearly tell Maddie how good it was to see her and that she smelled like a summer dumpster).

“You could’ve just face timed, you know that?” He helped his dad pick up the shopping bags. Peeking in, he could see his mother’s famous biscuits and chicken soup just underneath a pile of DVD’s.

“Some things are better in person, Tommy,” the older man said, and for the first time Tom noticed the gray stubble on his father’s cheeks.

“Yeah.” Tom couldn’t help but smile. “Boy, Mom really cooked up a storm, didn’t she?” He pulled not one, not two, but *five* containers of soup out of the next bag.

“You know how your mother gets when she’s anxious.” Tom Sr. jerked a thumb at the still-open front door. “There’s more out in the truck. We made a grocery run on the way here. Figured you wouldn’t’ve had time.”

Tom’s chest swelled with warmth. “Thanks. Seriously.”

“It’s what family does.”

“I know. Still.”

His father clapped him on the shoulder. “Go wash the pole-cat off. I’ve got things here.”

Tom didn’t need telling twice.

It was a relief to be showered and dressed, even if that meant a fresh pair of ratty pajamas and a t-shirt for both himself and Maddie, who were optimistic about getting even 15 quick minutes of shuteye at some point in the day.

His mother's voice floated up the steps from the kitchen, and they snuck past the living room of sleeping kids to find his father brewing coffee and his mother organizing and then reorganizing all of their cabinets.

"Couldn't find a needle in a sewin' box the way this kitchen was set up," she was tittering, stacking tupperware where they usually kept the spices, moving their pots to a cabinet they'd only ever used to hold the boring cereals they always bought but never wanted to touch. "I swear, Thomas, one of these days-"

"Our kitchen was fine, Mom."

"Says you!"

"Yeah, because it's my house." He didn't say it unkindly, accepting a cup of coffee from his father, taking a sip before nearly spitting it out. "Dad-!"

"Now listen here. You're in for a long day, and as your granddaddy used to say; a little whiskey goes a long way."

"It's *8 in the morning."*

"Don't make no difference. Drink up. You too, Maddie. And then help me unload all this soup your mama insisted on cooking."

Maddie was putting the cup to her lips with a grin when they heard a weak voice from the living room, a gurgling moan, followed by the clattering of the bucket against the coffee table and the very obvious sound of Sonic being sick.

"Oh god," Maddie put the cup down on the counter, but Rosie was already breezing past her, uncharacteristic flats squeaking on the wood floor.

"She's got it," Tom Sr. said gently. "Let her. It's all she's wanted to do for two days."

From the other room, Sonic's voice piped up sounding raw and choked and so desperately sad; "Gramma Rosie-?"

"Hey there, Love Bug."

There was another horribly sad, choking noise followed by a sob. "M'sorry, Gramma."

"Baby-"

"M'sorry I ran. Didn' wanna leave. M'sorry. Love you. Sorry."

"None'a that right now. Let's get you to the bathroom, yeah?"

Maddie relaxed. “He was so anxious about talking to you again. It’ll be good for him to see you both.”

Thomas Sr. hummed. “Poor kid. Had to have been feelin’ pretty down for all’a this to happen.”

Tom sighed into his coffee. “That might be a little bit our fault.”

“Changes are hard on everyone, son.” His father shook his head. “And from what you’ve told me, he’s been through Hell and back his whole life ‘fore you. Not to mention that crazy robot man that came stompin’ through town.”

“Yeah…”

“Just glad he’s got us all here.”

Maddie smiled, finally taking a long sip of coffee. The whiskey burned in all the right ways. “He adores you both, you know that?”

“The feelin’s mutual.”

The younger couple were sitting at the dining table while the older man stirred a big batch of oatmeal on the stove when Rosie returned, Sonic on her hip. If holding him was a struggle, she didn’t show it. “Somethin’ smells good in here.”

“Good an’ hearty,” Tom Sr. said. “Though there won’t be any hurt feelin’s if some folks can’t keep it down.” He left the spoon in the pot and crossed to his wife and grandson. He raised a calloused, weathered hand and brushed the boy’s burning cheek, stopping at his ears to give them a soft scratch. “You feel up to it?”

Eyes ringed, Sonic raised his head just an inch from Rosie’s shoulder. “I could try.”

“Atta boy.”

Big T went to get a bowl while Rosie sat down next to Maddie at the table, keeping Sonic on her lap. She seemed to be intent on never letting him go, leaning down to brush kisses against his sweaty forehead every few seconds.

“You look different.” Sonic’s voice was soft against her shoulder.

She laughed, just as softly. “Didn’t have the time to put my usual face an’ hair together, darlin’. A little too busy worryin’ with your granddaddy over where our grandbaby went.”

“M’sorry…”

“I know, sugar.” She squeezed him close. “You know how much me an’ Grandpa love you, right?”

“Love you more.”

“Impossible, sweet thing.”

The other two kids got up just as Sonic had managed to muscle through a quarter of a bowl and was curled up miserably on his grandmother’s lap.

“Hi, Grandma Rosie!”

“Hey there, baby cakes.”

“Grand-Mother Rose,” said Knuckles, looking up at her starry eyed as Tails clung to her other side. “It is good to see you.”

“Always good to see you, sweetheart! How’r you feelin’?”

“My natural strength has given me the power to defeat this parasite. I can already feel it retreating in humiliating defeat! You must forgive my brothers. It is not their fault they are weak and pitiful.”

“My aren’t you a ray of sunshine,” Rosie said around a laugh. “Up to tryin’ some food?”

“I will gladly accept sustenance.”

Knuckles went on to eat nearly the entire pot of oatmeal before taking the rest of Sonic’s. Tails was feeling well enough to eat something, already telling his grandparents about all the new inventions he was working on, his grandfather asking the right questions and telling him about the updates he needed done at the ranch. Sonic contributed a word or two, but mostly stayed quiet, Rosie holding him tight, his grandfather reaching over every so often to smooth down sweaty quills.

It wouldn’t be thirty minutes later before the grandparents were ushering Maddie and Tom to the stairs.

“We can handle a couple’a sick kids.”

“Are you *sure*, Dad?”

“Yes! Now go get some sleep. The two’a you look like you crawled out of the gutter.”

“If you need anything-”

“They’ve got it,” said Maddie, a little too quickly, looking very close to passing out on the steps. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s nothing, Madeline! You go get some shuteye. We’ve got this.”

“I know it was a shock having them show up,” Maddie mumbled as they hurried up the steps, “but thank god for your parents.”

“Agreed.”

Tom and Maddie were asleep before their heads even hit the pillows.

Knuckles and Tails were enthusiastic over the appearance of their grandparents, who were more than happy to take over while their parents finally got a moment's rest.

Rosie took control quickly, refilling water bottles with pedialyte and sweeping away saltine crumbs before sending her husband to “go and draw the coldest bath this side of the Antarctic” before hustling all three of her grandchildren to the upstairs bathroom.

“I am too old to bathe with these children!” Knuckles protested, crossing his arms.

“Honey darlin', last I checked whatever you've got worth hidin' is plenty hidden already, now march!”

Sonic was still burning up, and did his best to stagger up the steps before his grandmother once again hefted him up. “No complaints from you about gettin’ clean? Now I know you’re sick. Took me a generals keep ta get you into the tub at the ranch after you went runnin’ after the horses. *Still* got muck in my drain, I think!”

“When do we get to see the horses?” Tails asked, holding onto the sink while he toed off his socks.

“Soon, sweetpea, I promise.”

“Are these Earth Beasts?”

“Sure are, Sugar.”

“Do we hunt them for sustenance?”

“Not hardly!”

“You ride’em,” said Thomas Sr. as he checked the water, kneeling down and hunching by the tub, managing to fold himself as best he could in the smaller space. “When y’all come down, Sonic can show you. He’s ridden all our horses.”

If Sonic weren’t so slumped over, he might have beamed with pride at Tails’ awestruck face. Knuckles was doing his best to hide how impressed he was with a badly placed scowl.

“We’ll have plenty’a time to show you pictures. Now come on. Hop in. Faces aren’t gonna wash themselves!”

Tails shrieked when his grandfather dropped him into the water. “S’cold!”

“Weakling,” scoffed Knuckles, but yelped when he stuck his foot into the tub. “Dishonorable! Why do you want us to freeze!”

“Oh stop your bellyachin’. A little cold never killed anybody. Builds character.”

“That is patently untrue, Grand Matriarch Wachowski!”

Rose sat on the side of the tub, lowering Sonic in. The boy barely flinched.

“The lake would be more pleasant than this,” Knuckles griped, still standing in the tub on his tiptoes.

“Who’s the weakling now?” Tails splashed him and the echidna let out a squeal five octaves higher than his usual baritone.

“Why you-” Whatever insult the echidna had been preparing was cut off when Tom Sr. dumped a pitcher of water over his head. “Betrayal!” he squeaked.

“Sit,” the old sheriff told him. “You get used to it faster that way.”

“I do not wish to get used to it!” Knuckles protested, before he was assaulted with a scrub brush.

Tails snickered. “Some mighty warrior.”

“Don’t tease,” Rosie said, lathering up her hands and scrubbing him down. Once he was rinsed off, she gave him one of the pitchers to play with and moved on to Sonic.

He didn’t protest being cleaned, and the cold water *did* perk him up just enough to tell Knuckles, “You look like the bulldogs when they go see the groomer at Mom’s work.”

“I loathe you,” Knuckles growled, but then the scrub brush hit a spot between his shoulder blades and he shuddered involuntarily.

“See, not so bad, right?” Rosie said, hands still combing through Sonic’s quills.

But Knuckles was too busy telling his grandfather, “Lower… a little to the left…” to acknowledge her.

One by one they were rinsed off, hefted out of the tub and vigorously dried, Rosie produced another shopping bag seemingly out of thin air. “New, fresh things always help when I’m not feelin’ up to snuff,” she said, drawing three new sets of pajamas from the bag. “Cut holes in ‘em for tails an’ everything.”

Tails gasped, “Is the one with the airplanes for me?”

“Course it is.” She helped him step into them and zipped them up to his chin.

Sonic’s was a two-piece set with race cars, and Knuckles was given a green button-up pair that he tried to insist he didn’t need, until his fingers brushed the silky fabric and he changed his mind.

“Even the roughest and toughest need somethin’ soft now an’ again,” Rosie told him, helping with the buttons on the top.

Muzzle pink, he nodded, mumbling his thanks.

Their parents' nap ended just before dinnertime.

The two of them came staggering down the steps to a clean house and even cleaner kids, two of whom were eating soup in front of the TV, transfixed by Ferris Bueller on the screen. Thomas Sr. was reading some novel about old ships and Rosie was knitting aggressively enough that Tom was surprised the needles weren't bursting into flames. Sonic was leaning against his grandfather's side, sandwiched between his grandparents, a comic book in hand.

Thomas Sr. barely looked up from his book when Tom sat next to him, grunting by ways of a greeting. Tom reached over and ruffled Sonic's fur. "Thanks for tagging in," Tom told his parents, sitting back hard against the couch. "We were drowning these last few days."

Thomas Sr. chuckled. "Welcome to bein' a parent. I was wonderin' when you'd start seein' some of the harder stuff come through."

"We've gone through rough times, Dad."

"Please. That wasn't nothin'. It's the heart poundin' stuff that really gets you sweatin' as a parent."

Between his grandparents, Sonic flinched down. "Sorry," he said, for what must have been the millionth time.

His grandfather reached over to scratch his ears. "You're here. S'all that matters now, right?"

"... right."

"'Sides, you weren't the only kid to scare their parents into the grave. We went through that with your Dad, too."

"Amen," said Rosie from beside him, switching colors of yarn. "Our Tommy was an easy kid for the most part, but I think I near went gray when you were fourteen and wound up in the county jail."

"You were already going gray, Ma."

"You hush your mouth! I've never been gray a day in my life!"

Sonic perked up between them. "Dad was in *jail?"*

"Yessir, he was."

"Mom, we really don't need to talk about this."

"We really, really do," insisted Sonic.

Maddie plopped down next to her husband. "You never told me you were a *criminal!"*

“I’m not a criminal!”

“He was love drunk, is what he was,” said Ms. Rosie. “Stole our truck to go and impress his first girlfriend. Oh my, what was her name again? Oh, she was just awful. Little rich thing who never lifted a finger for nobody!”

Big T snapped his fingers. “Tracy Ann.”

“Tracy Ann! That’s the one!”

Maddie blinked. “… isn’t she the woman who helps run the country club?”

Tom dropped his head to his hands. “Yes,” he mumbled, miserable.

“Oh my god, she’s one of my *clients!* She has the worst little *bichon frise* named Chanel! Tom! I had no idea she was your girlfriend!”

“She’s *not* my girlfriend!”

“That’s so sweet!” Maddie cooed. “We should get her something for next Valentine's day!”

“Anyway,” said Ms. Rosie, gesturing with her knitting needles, “Thomas here thought it would be a swell idea to show up in some big romantic gesture to her house. Trouble was, he was only fourteen and too embarrassed to ask us for help.”

Tom looked up to glare at his mother. “Would you have helped?”

“Course not! We didn’t like that girl one bit! But Thomas liked her enough to take our truck when we were asleep.”

“He didn’t.” Sonic grinned, clamoring to his knees. “He *stole your truck*?”

“Hand to God!”

Thomas Sr. let out a deep rumble of a laugh. “We got called in near after midnight to *my own station* , sayin’ my son was bein’ held in custody for running our truck into the Green Hills sign.”

Sonic almost fell off the couch laughing. His father glared down at him.

“I take it Miss Tracy Ann was *less* than impressed,” Maddie smirked.

“She, apparently, decided to make a run for it back home before the deputy turned up,” Rosie said.

“Oooof,” Maddie winced exaggeratedly. “That’s cold.”

“Needless to say, we didn’t hear no more about her from *this* one.” Rosie jabbed at Tom with a knitting needle.

From the other end of the couch, Knuckles leaned forward over his soup bowl. “I do not understand - weren’t you and Father betrothed from birth?”

That got all the grown-ups laughing.

“Things don’t work like that in Montana, darlin’,” Rosie said gently.

He put another spoonful in his mouth, mulling it over. “Even so, I do not see how this… country club woman could possibly catch your eye when there was *Mother?*”

“Mom and I didn’t meet until *college,* bud!” Tom explained. “We were in our early twenties. This whole… thing was back when I was younger than Sonic!”

“Oh, and we were so *happy* when he brought her home for the first time,” Rosie said, setting her knitting aside so she could better talk with her hands. “This pretty little city girl took her spring break to come out to the ranch and we thought for sure she’d be out of element, but she took to it all like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Asking Grandpa all about the horses, and up at the crack of dawn with the rest of us. We were all pleased as punch, I can tell you.”

“Awww.” Maddie put a hand to her chest.

Tom Sr. smiled. “Pulled Tommy aside when you were packin’ for school and told him not to let you get away. Gave him his grandmother’s ring to take back with him.” He nodded in the direction of Maddie’s left hand.

She turned to her husband. “That’s why you were so weird on the plane!”

Tom scrubbed the back of his neck, ears red. “I was twenty-one! We’d been dating for like, three-months!”

“He took the ring, though,” Tom Sr. said.

Maddie slipped her hand through the crook in Tom’s arm, squeezing in to kiss his cheek.

“Awwww, this story went from hilarious to sappy so fast…” Sonic whined.

“Hey. Don’t complain,” Maddie said, leaning over to pinch his chin, dragging his face a little closer, landing a loud *smack* of a kiss against his cheek.

“Ew!”

She kissed him again, louder, on the other cheek. “His stint in jail landed him with *me* and we ended up getting *you* .”

“You’re a part of the sap,” Tom declared, planting a string of just as obnoxious sounding kisses between the boy’s ears before Sonic finally wriggled out of their grip and scurried away to hide at his grandfather’s side.

“You guys are gross,” he muttered against Big T’s shoulder, hiding his flush and smile when all he got in return was a round of laughter.

They were halfway through the first episode of a Marvel show (one of the only ways Tom had managed to bargain with Sonic over taking more of the dreaded grape medicine, not that Maddie was complaining with Loki on the screen) when the doorbell rang. Ozzie went off barking, and Tom started to get up from the couch but Rosie shooed him back down and made her way to the front of the house.

They could vaguely hear talking from the entryway, and then Rosie was peeking her head back into the living room. “Sonic. There’s a nice boy out here lookin’ for you.”

Sonic lifted his head from the arm of the couch, looking just as pitiful as he felt. “… who?”

“Dunno, sugar. Says he’s a friend’a yours. You wanna come say hi? I told’m to just stay a few feet away so he didn’t catch nothin’. Whole of this town doesn’t need your flu.”

With a throw blanket around his shoulders, Sonic shuffled past his grandmother and to the front door-

“Ah!”

-where he was immediately dragged into a hug by a very upset Jeremy.

“The Hell were you thinking!”

Sonic opened his mouth to answer, but couldn’t find one worth saying besides, “my grandma said you couldn’t touch me.” His voice was tighter than he’d expected it to be, and he wiped his eyes against Jeremy’s shoulder.

“I don’t care,” Jeremy sniffled. “Thought you were halfway to Jupiter.”

“There’s no air on Jupiter.”

“Whatever.” The human boy squeezed tighter. “I mean, jeez, man.”

“I know,” Sonic sighed. “M’sorry.”

They stood for a long moment, and then there were footsteps behind Jeremy on the porch and Cheryll was clearing her throat. “Hi, Mrs. Wachowski! You might not remember me, we met at the fourth of July party last summer?”

“Of course, darling!” Rosie stepped forward to clasp the younger woman’s free hand. “Nice to see you again. And my goodness, what’ve you got there?”

“Oh!” Cheryll raised the reusable grocery bag in her other hand. “Just, um, some things I thought the boys might need. Pedialyte, saltines.” The top of a wine bottle stuck out noticeably and she laughed guiltily. “That’s for Maddie and Tom.”

“Oh, they’ll be needin’ it right surely.” Rosie winked as she took the bag. “It sure was nice of y’all to stop by, but the boys are still still mighty contagious, and I’d hate to pass this plague onto your house.”

“You heard the woman,” Cheryll said, tapping Jermey on the shoulder. “Come on. We’ll see them again soon.”

The boy looked at Sonic. “Promise?”

The hedgehog nodded. “I promise.”

Jeremy looked satisfied with that, and followed his mom back to their car.

“Ain’t that sweet?” Rosie hummed. Then she put an arm around Sonic and steered him back inside. “That’s a good friend right there.”

Sonic peeked back over his shoulder to watch the car pull out of the drive. Jeremy was waving from the back seat. “Yeah.”

Tom’s parents had brought enough with them to stay the night, but Tom and Maddie assured them that they’d been more than enough help.

“We can handle it from here, Mom,” Tom assured with a tight hug. “You just worry about driving back safe.”

“You’ll call me later, though? So I can make sure they’re alright?”

“I promise.”

They said goodbye on the front porch. Tails was despondent to see them leaving until his grandfather promised he could ride the horses next time they were at the farm.

“We really get to go?” he asked his own parents.

Maddie nodded. “Of course. It’s only an hour drive.”

“And a few minutes to run,” Sonic chimed in tiredly from where he was leaning against the front door.

Knuckles nodded. “I will be pleased to meet your Earth Beasts. Perhaps I can teach them how to hunt.”

“Let’s just get your ridin’ first,” said his grandfather.

The echidna hummed. “Does one require the Wachowski Crown for that?”

“The… what?”

“He means the hat, Dad.”

Thomas Sr. laughed. “We’ll see about gettin’ you one of those, then.”

Sonic stood back by his parents legs, watching Knuckles and Tails fawn over their grandparents. Maddie looked down, frowning. “Baby, you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said.

No, he meant.

She heard the subtext quick enough, kneeling beside her son. “They’re not angry at you, Sonic.”

He looked down at his socked feet. “They were so worried.”

“So were *we*. I'd be surprised if they weren't scared out of their minds”

“It’s my fault.”

She sighed. “Bad times happen. It’s no one’s fault. It’s just — a dip. That’s all. And we’re figuring it out, yeah?”

“I guess…”

“And you’re not going to vanish again.”

“*No*.”

“I know that, honey. So do they. But you're going to have to accept that a lot of people were very, very scared. That’s the hard part about having people love you."

He nodded.

From the driveway, Rosie was fiddling with Tails’ pajama zipper while Knuckles solemnly held the Stetson in his hands.

Sonic raised a hand to wave almost shyly while the back of their car was finally packed up.

“Now I know my grandson did not just *wave* goodbye at me.” Thomas Sr. took his hat back from Knuckles, giving Sonic a stern look. “That or I’m just imagining things.”

The hedgehog swallowed, debating something internally until Maddie reached down and pinched his shoulder. “Go on,” she whispered.

There was a blue blur, and then Sonic was standing in front of his grandfather. He rocked on his heels, looking up, up, up at the towering man in front of him, almost as if he was waiting for some sort of a stern chiding, fists bundled tight at his sides.

Big T kneeled down.

From the porch Maddie could see her father-in-law saying something, but she couldn’t make out what it was. Sonic ducked his head, but his grandfather eased it back up with soft nudge

under his chin. She watched her son smile, watery and tight, and then Big T was reaching out and pulling him in close.

“The two of them,” Rosie said at the stairs again, looking over fondly. “Two peas in a pod, you know that?”

“Yeah,” Maddie said, clearing her throat to fight against the budding tears. “Yeah, they are.”

They all waved goodbye as the truck rumbled down the driveway and back onto the main dirt road before ducking out of sight behind the trees.

Sonic leaned on Maddie’s leg, watching the space where there truck had been.

“You okay, baby?”

He sniffled and hid his face against her knees. “Got a family,” he muttered.

She nodded, leaning down far enough to pull him in tight. “You do,” she said. “And that family loves you very much. Now how about we get you back to the couch with your brothers.”

His sniffle was the only reply she got.

What To Expect When You're Finally Adapting: Family Edition

Chapter Summary

In which bodies, and hearts, continue to heal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite what his parents said (germs just don't work like that), Knuckles attributed his speedy recovery to willpower alone.

"The illness knew it was up against a galactic warrior!" He stood on the couch, one leg up on the armrest. "I have once again vanquished a mighty foe!"

"Mom," Sonic groaned into a pillow. "Make him stop celebrating or my head's gonna explode."

"Knuckles, honey-"

"Victories are not quiet, *Mother*."

Maddie and Tom stayed home until Tuesday. Thankfully, Tails and Sonic seemed to be over the worst of their flu, but hadn't quite shaken the tail end. And since they both couldn't take another day off (what with Wade already drowning in paperwork and Maddie's clients overbooking her poor coworkers), that left only one person left in the house on sick duty.

"You can't do this!" Sonic followed his parents, draped in his quilt. "You can't leave us with *him* !"

"If there's another option, bud, I'd love to hear it." Tom fastened his badge onto his belt, drinking coffee with his free hand. "But until then, he's old enough to watch the house."

"He *destroyed* it last time!"

"He wasn't part of the family then. And you know that was really Robotnik's fault anyway." Maddie brushed past them both, tying the waist of her scrubs and rummaging through the junk drawer for her keys.

"*I* could watch us!"

"You're fifteen and *sick* . He's sixteen and *not sick* . He wins."

"What about Gramma and Grandpa?"

“They were *just* here, and they’ve got a whole farm-load of animals to take care of.”

“What about Tails!”

“Tails is *eight*.”

“I’m a very mature eight!” Tails peeped from where he was drinking a juice box on the couch. The animal crackers he was munching on didn’t help much.

“Mother has put me in charge, and I will not take my duties lightly.” Knuckles strode in, chest puffed and shoulders squared. “I have accepted her trust and her gratuity!”

“Her- *wait*.” Sonic gawked up at his parents. “You’re *paying him?”*

“He’s watching you all day, Sonic, of course we’re paying him.”

“I watched *myself* plenty of times! Where’s my money!”

Maddie kneeled down and kissed her fuming son on the snout. “Sorry, kid. Parent taxes took most of that.”

“I’ve been *scammed!”*

“Be good,” she said, flicking his nose. “And don’t give Knuckles any trouble.”

Sonic rolled his eyes, tugging the quilt tighter around his shoulders.

“Worry not, Mother. I will not let you down.” Knuckles thumped his chest with a fist.

“I know you won’t, baby.” She reached out and scratched him under the chin and the Galaxy’s Mightiest Warrior wagged his tail.

Sonic pouted, muttering, “Mama’s boy.”

Maddie opened her mouth, but before she could scold him, Knuckles said. “I am Mother’s *best* boy. Right, Mother?”

She laughed, cupped his cheeks in both hands and peppered his face with kisses. “Absolutely.” In addition to the wagging tail, Knuckles’ right leg began thumping on the ground.

“Wha- *Mom!*”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were making *fun* of mama’s boys!”

“Hey!” Tom grabbed his lunch from the fridge. “What about *me*, bud!”

Sonic grumbled again and hefted his quilt a little higher.

Tom snorted, then crossed the room to chuck Sonic under the chin. “Title of Dad’s Little Man is still up for grabs.”

Sonic rolled his eyes again, but his mouth twitched upwards.

“If Sonic does not wish to claim the title-” Knuckles started.

“No, no, no! I’ll take it!” Sonic leaned against Tom’s legs. “Does it hafta sound so cutesy, though?”

“‘Fraid so.” Tom grinned, ruffling blue fur with his free hand.

From the living room, Tails called out, “What do I get to be?”

“Mom and Dad’s Fluffy Genius,” Tom answered.

“Yes!”

“Well, now that we’ve cleared *that* up,” Tom said, passing Maddie her lunchbox. “We gotta run.”

“We do!”

In a flurry of motion, and noise they were out the door, chorusing *Be good! No junk food! See you at 5:15!* as the door shut behind them.

The quiet settled over the house.

Sonic looked at Knuckles. “So what does Mother’s Best Boy have to say about ice cream for breakfast?”

Knuckles squared his shoulders again. “That Father’s Little Man is pushing his luck.” Sonic sighed, and then he added. “Ask me again when it is lunchtime.”

Sonic smirked. “Fair.”

Sonic was hoping that perhaps with Knuckles taking up as Echidna of the House it would leave room for him to get a little free time.

Apparently though, Knuckles had their mother’s entire routine and schedule memorized and was not about to waver just because she was at work.

“Mother has *trained me*,” Knuckles explained as he held the Nintendo remotes over his head. “No video games until after *dinner*.”

“But Mom’s not *here*!”

“She has entrusted me!”

“Come *on* , dude!” Sonic had thrown off the quilt and was standing opposite Knuckles, the coffee table between them. “Last time they were gone I threw a party and they never knew!”

Knuckles' eyes bulged. "You threw a *bacchanal* without Mother's permission!"

"A… a what?"

"*Dishonorable* ! It is no wonder Mother has left me in charge."

Sonic slotted his eyes, folding himself into a runner's stance. "You think I can't take those controllers from you?"

"Sonic. I warn you. I have been gifted with Mother's trust and the title of Best Boy. I take neither reward lightly."

"Guys," Tails squeaked from the couch. "Don't fight! You both said you *loved* each other the other night!"

"The Fox speaks the truth," said Knuckles. "And so I shall lovingly pummel my brother if he tries to disobey the rules of this house."

To his credit, Sonic did *try*.

Unfortunately, a heavy mix of no sleep and cough medicine made it a little harder to do much of anything besides fall over himself. He tried to spindash but ended up doing a sluggish somersault into the coffee table. When he finally staggered up, he remembered that with great power came great responsibility, and he didn't *want* to be responsible. So great power could take a hike in favor of tackling his older brother to the ground the old fashioned way.

"Give it to me!"

"*No!"*

"I wanna play Nintendo!"

"Mother said you're not allowed!"

"Mom's not here!"

"Mother left me in charge, and so help me Sonic-"

"Come on guys…" Tails whined, watching them grapple on the carpet. "Knuckles, isn't there something fun we *are* allowed to do?"

The echidna grunted, flipping the hedgehog onto the ground and sitting on his back. "I know that there are assignments you both need to complete before returning to school."

"Uuuuggghhhhh *homework?* " Sonic groaned into the rug.

"It needs to be done."

"You're the wooooooorst. And get offa me."

"No. I am doing the Baby-Sitting."

“I’m not a baby!”

“Then cease tantruming like one.”

Tails asked, “If we get our work done, could we do that ice cream for lunch thing?”

“I suppose so.”

“Come on, Sonic. It’s gotta get done. And if we do it together, maybe it won’t be so bad! Please?”

Sonic sighed. “Fiiiiiine. Just lemme up, you big doofus.”

Knuckles rose. “You mock me?”

“Yeah.”

“In a brotherly way?”

“Yeah.”

With a nod, the echidna grabbed Sonic by the shoulders and hoisted him back to his feet. “Very well. I will fetch your assignments.”

“Great.” Sonic slumped back onto the couch.

“It’s okay,” Tails said, offering him the box of animal crackers. “It’ll be a breeze. And then we get ice cream!”

Sonic had been dreading help from Tails ever since that day in the kitchen when Maddie had brushed him off. It had hurt at the time (it still stung if he thought about it too long), and the idea of anyone else helping him with science other than his mother was foreign and a little lonely.

But it turned out that Tails actually did know what he was talking about.

“So… that’s not the small intestine?”

“No, that’s the *large* intestine. See- it balloons more out at the bottom!”

“So this is the… small intestine?”

“That’s the *lung*.”

“How do you know all of this!” Sonic erased his answers, adding in the correct ones to the frog diagram.

“I bet he has dissected his enemies in the past!” Knuckles said from the coffee table where he was circling the parts of a plant (after adding sunglasses onto the sun as Sonic suggested).

“What? *No! Gross!”* Tails stuck out his tongue. “I just read a lot of books when Sonic started learning this stuff.”

“Started-” Sonic counted back. “That was last week!”

Tails shrugged. “I read fast. And mom said you might need help.”

“You learned this stuff just to help me?”

Tails went silent, flipping through the first Percy Jackson novel he’d taken off the bookshelf.

Well if *that* didn’t make Sonic feel rotten…

“That’s- uh. That’s really nice of you.”

“No problem,” Tails squeaked into the book.

Sonic looked down at the diagram, labeling the right lung. “Sorry about- uh. You know. All of that stuff I said. Before.”

Tails lowered the book. “Sonic…”

“I didn’t say it earlier. Sorry, I mean. I never said sorry. I know you said you weren’t mad, but you should’ve been.” Sonic glared down at his workbook. “I was a jerk. And a- a bad big brother.”

The little fox hugged the book tight. “Thanks. That means a lot.”

“Not enough.”

“Yeah enough.” Setting the book down, Tails scooted closer to hug Sonic from the side. “Enough for me.”

The hand that held Sonic’s pencil was shaking and he let it drop so he could wrap his arms around Tails. “I really am. Sorry. So, *so, **so***-”

“I know.”

For a moment they just sat quietly in the embrace. Knuckles glanced up, gave a small nod of approval, and went back to his own work.

Eventually, Sonic pulled back, clearing his throat. “You. Um. You should be on the fridge. You’re really smart.”

“So are you.”

“Nah. I had to learn all of this on my own before I got to Mom and Dad. Had to learn how to read and write and do simple math and stuff. Sesame Street helped a little, too. But I never knew as much as you did.” He shifted to pick up his pencil again. “Just- I guess I was jealous. That you guys got help faster than I did.”

Tails thought a moment, laying a hand on his book but not yet lifting it. “I guess… I can use that to help you now,” he said, before adding, “and you are, by the way. Super smart, I mean.”

“But also a doo-fus,” Knuckles declared from the rug. “Haha! You see? Even I can master brotherly mocking!”

“As if!”

“I can still baby-sit upon you again, Brother. Do not challenge me.”

He only didn’t challenge him because he was comfortable on the couch.

And they *did* get to have ice cream for lunch (after being sworn to secrecy on pain of death should their Mom ever find out).

After lunch, Knuckles let Ozzie out in the back yard and announced that the fresh air would ‘*vanquish the foul parasites ravaging your frail bodies*’. So they relocated to the back deck, dragging their blankets and snacks out with them. It wasn’t as fun not being able to climb the trees or play in the sprinkler, but the late spring sun was warm enough that both Sonic and Tails fell asleep in their adirondack chairs.

Despite Sonic’s previous insistence that naps were for babies, he gladly slept through the next hour until he was roused by Knuckles loudly yawning from his spot on the deck. The echidna had apparently been trying out yoga on Maddie’s mat unsuccessfully and instead had decided that lying down in an especially warm pool of sunshine was the way to go.

Ozzie must have had the same idea, because he’d joined the eldest and was snoring happily on his side, tongue lolling.

“Aren’t you s’posed to be watching us, Mr. All Star Babysitter?” Sonic yawned just as loudly as Knuckles. “Not very ‘sponsible of you.”

“I am a warrior,” Knuckles mumbled. “I am ready to attack and defend at all times.”

He didn’t look much ready for anything, and when a warm breeze passed through, Sonic swore he heard Knuckles purr.

Sonic looked up at the roof that was currently blocking the sun from his chair. It was chilly enough in the shade to warrant a shiver, even under the blanket.

“Alright. You convinced me. Scooch.”

Knuckles peeked open an eye, glaring. “I did not ask you to join me.”

“And yet.” He slid off the deck chair, padding to the yoga mat and the little duo. Ozzie cracked open an eye, and the deck made a hollow thumping noise when his tail wagged against it. “See? Ozzie wants me here!”

“Ozzie is a simple animal.”

“Don’t listen to him, Oz. You’re the best boy around.”

“*I* am the best boy,” Knuckles snapped lazily. “Mother said so.”

“Mmhm. Now move.”

With some maneuvering, Sonic managed to squeeze himself against Knuckles’ side. For all his grumbling, the echidna didn’t put up much of a fight, and they ended up curled together on the afternoon warmed yoga mat, enjoying the sun patch.

Sonic was just starting to drift off, when a shuffling noise made him open one eye. He found Tails standing over them, blanket still around his shoulders, yawning and rubbing his eyes. “Me too?” he murmured.

Sonic nodded sleepily, lifting one arm and letting the kit snuggle in against his chest.

“Huh,” Tails said, wrinkling his nose, ear twitching.

“What?”

“Your heartbeat’s super fast.”

“Well sure. S’gotta keep up with the rest of me.”

Tails glared down at his brother’s chest. “Shh,” he told Sonic’s heart, as if that might have slowed it down and made his nap a little quieter. When that didn’t work, he rolled his eyes and settled back down.

Knuckles chuckled, low and raspy before letting out a gaping yawn. He rolled over, slinging his arm across the two. It was a pinning weight, and on most days Sonic might have complained (“you’re crushing me, blockhead!”), but under the early Spring sun, the yoga mat beneath them, the heavy weight of Knuckles’ arm twining he and Tails together;

It felt-

(peaceful)

(soothing)

(comforting)

-safe.

It wasn’t quite a feeling he might have pinned on Knuckles, who had used those hands to blow him through the television and had him caught by the neck against the shed that still stood in their backyard.

But here he was; safe.

Sandwiched between his brothers, behind the home they shared, lazing the day away while they waited for their parents to return.

You are not alone, he thought.

And this time, there was no second thought. No niggling doubt.

Against his chest, Tails sighed sleepily. “That’s better.”

And it was.

They didn’t wake until the sound of tires on the gravel driveway caught Ozzie’s attention and the retriever bounded up, barking happily. Groggy as they were, and tangled together in the jumble of blankets, they were still on the yoga mat when the french doors opened.

“There you are,” Maddie’s voice preceded her out onto the deck. “Looks like you three had a good day, hmm?”

“Mommy!” Tails was the first to wriggle free, hurrying into her arms. “Izzit it that late already?”

“Yup,” she laughed, kissing his temple. “How’re you feeling?”

“Better! We got all our homework done!”

“No way!”

“Yes way!”

“Love it! Good boy. Go wash up for dinner.”

“Kay!”

She padded closer, grinning down at the older two, who were still working to disentangle and sit up. “I’d say this was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life, but I’d hate to bruise any egos.”

“My ego is unbruisable,” Knuckles assured her.

“Hey Mom,” Sonic mumbled, ego slightly less than unbruisable.

“Hey baby.” She offered him a hand and helped him to his feet. “How’re *you* feeling?”

He stood a moment, rounded his shoulders, cracked his neck, took stock. “Really good, actually. Hungry, mostly.”

“I’d say that’s an *excellent* sign.” She tapped his nose with her finger, then steered him towards the door. “Go wash up. And how’d babysitting go?” She turned to Knuckles, who was standing as well, both blankets folded under one arm. “House is still standing.”

“I only had to sit on Sonic once.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Oh really?”

“Yes. After that, he was generally agreeable. We had an uneventful afternoon. This wooden structure is ideal for resting.”

“Oh, Dad and I have had some excellent naps out here, lemme tell ya.”

“You must join us then,” he insisted, reaching out to clasp her hand. “Next time.”

“I would *love* that.” She squeezed his hand. “And thank you, for taking such good care of everything today.”

His muzzle flushed pink. “I have… earned my title, then?”

She tugged on the hand that held hers, drawing him into a hug. “You would be my best boy even if things hadn’t gone perfect today.”

“I would?”

“Yes. You will *always* be my best boy. Just by being you.”

He hid his face in her scrubs, tail wagging furiously, low rumbly purrs filling the evening air.

She gave him one more squeeze, then twisted them both towards the french doors. “C’mon, big guy. Let’s go eat. Think we’re finally gonna get back into our regular routine tomorrow. So long as Sonic and Tails aren’t up too late after that nap.”

“I could just weigh them down again. That seemed to have a significant calming effect.”

“You don’t say.” Maddie made a mental note to look into weighted blankets as they made their way back inside.

Sonic woke to his little brother bouncing on his comforter.

“School today! School today! We get to go back to school today, Sonic!”

The hedgehog rolled over with a sleepy laugh, pulling the covers over his head. “Yayyyy…”

“C’mon!” The fox climbed atop him, poking at the lump of blankets. “Let’s go!”

“M’comin’, m’comin’.” Sonic mumbled, then, with a grin, sprung up and caught the kit around the middle, making him shriek with laughter.

“No fair,” Tails said, wriggling free between giggles.

“S’the Don’t Wake Big Brother Up Tax.”

“Worth it.” The fox spun his tails and floated down from the top bunk.

Sonic heard the attic stairs creak down as he yawned. Sun was pouring through the skylight, the sounds of birds drifting in through the inch they'd left it open. For the first time in weeks, he felt light, loose, limber. He zipped down to the floor, did a few Sun Salutations, and then headed downstairs.

In the kitchen, Knuckles stood on a step stool in front of the stove, with Maddie behind him. Hand-over-giant-hand, she guided him through a pancake flip.

When the flapjack landed perfectly center in the pan, the echidna gave a squeal. "Mother! Mother, *look!* "

"I see it, baby!" She kissed the top of his head and his tail wagged hard.

"Way to go, Knuckles!" Tails said, looking up from where he was gathering forks and knives out of a drawer.

"See?" Tom said, smiling as he poured coffee. "Not magic. Just practice."

"Nice one, Knux." Sonic was grinning as he pulled open the fridge to snag a juicebox.

"You wanna try another one?" Maddie asked.

Knuckles shook his head. "I will leave the rest to you, Mother. But may I practice again on Saturday?"

"You betcha."

He hopped down from the stool and approached Tom, holding a hand out expectantly for the mug he'd just poured.

"Nice try, bud," Tom said. "Go grab a juice."

Sonic handed him a grape one. "Could'a told ya that wasn't gonna work."

"I have been in charge, I should be allowed the adult morning beverage," Knuckles grumbled, but he took the juicebox. "You look well, Brother. I trust the parasites have at last retreated in defeat?"

"All vanquished," Sonic chuckled, taking a seat at the dining table.

"Excellent." Knuckles climbed up onto the bench beside him, stretching across the table to spread out the stack of plates Maddie had placed in the center. Tails hovered around, laying out utensils.

Tom put the coffee mugs down on either end of the table, and Maddie brought over a big plate full of pancakes. "Eat up."

"Why pancakes on a Wednesday?" Sonic asked, picking up a fork and spearing three for himself. "We usually do pancakes on Saturday."

“Special treat,” she told him. “Because my house is finally stomach-bug-free.”

“I’ll toast to that.” Tom raised his mug as she took the seat opposite him. She raised her own in return.

Tails raised his apple juice. “Cheers!” he beamed. “To going back to school!”

“To vanquishing foul parasites!” Knuckles added, lifting his grape juice.

The whole table looked at Sonic, who had a mouth full of pancakes.

“Wut?”

The laughter filled the kitchen, easy and right and contagious, so Sonic was laughing too as he wiped the syrup from his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he plucked up his own juice and raised it up. “To getting back to normal,” he said. “The *new* normal.”

“The new normal!” his family chorused.

Ozzie chose that moment to put his paws on the table and snag a pancake off Tom’s plate. Tom made to chase after him, but the dog was already out of the room and he sank back into his chair as laughter rang out again around his lamentation of *living with **animals** here!* Maddie feigned sympathy as Knuckles offered to *more properly train the canine* and Tails pondered how to rig up a dog-at-the-table alarm. In the middle of it all, surrounded by what he could only describe as comfortable chaos, Sonic smiled, and dug back into his breakfast.

-Fin-

Chapter End Notes

Humanity here!

This story has absolutely been the wildest of rides. Just over two months ago, Invader_Sam and I never could have imagined that the story we started brainstorming over late night texts would have garnered so much love, enthusiasm, and an amazingly dedicated following. Thank you all so, so much.

It's also because of that enthusiasm, that we are beyond excited to start posting the sequel, which is basically written and just needs some editing. We hope that you stick around for that as well! It was another invention created by late night texting and a whole lot of caps lock.

And for those Knuckles enthusiasts out there; we see you. The next story is going to be his. Lots of angst and family feels abound.

Thanks again to all of you. We've enjoyed every minute of this journey and can't wait to continue seeing where it takes us.

❤️ Humanity and Invader_Sam

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!